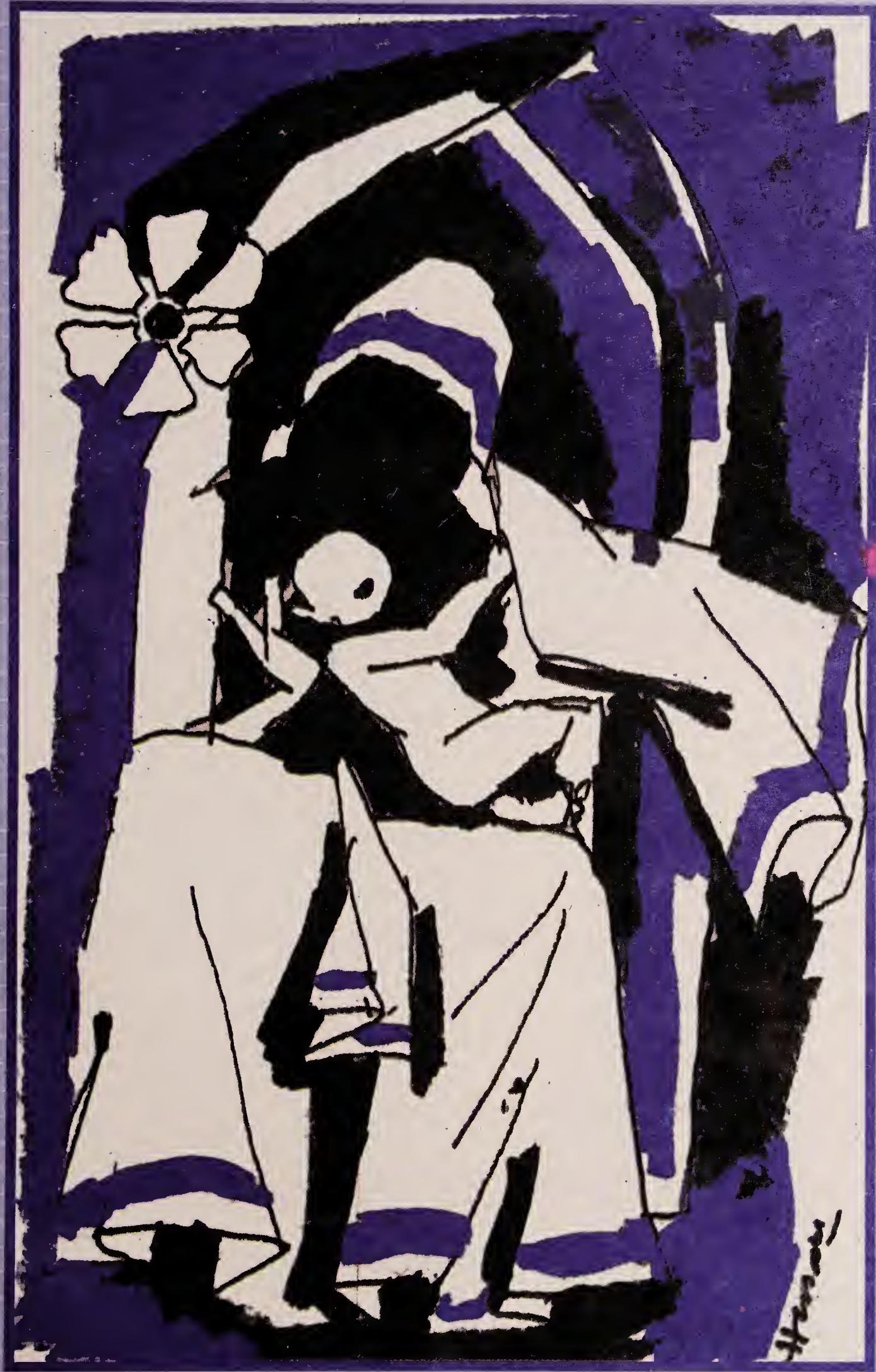


# MOTHER TERESA

## INSPIRING INCIDENTS



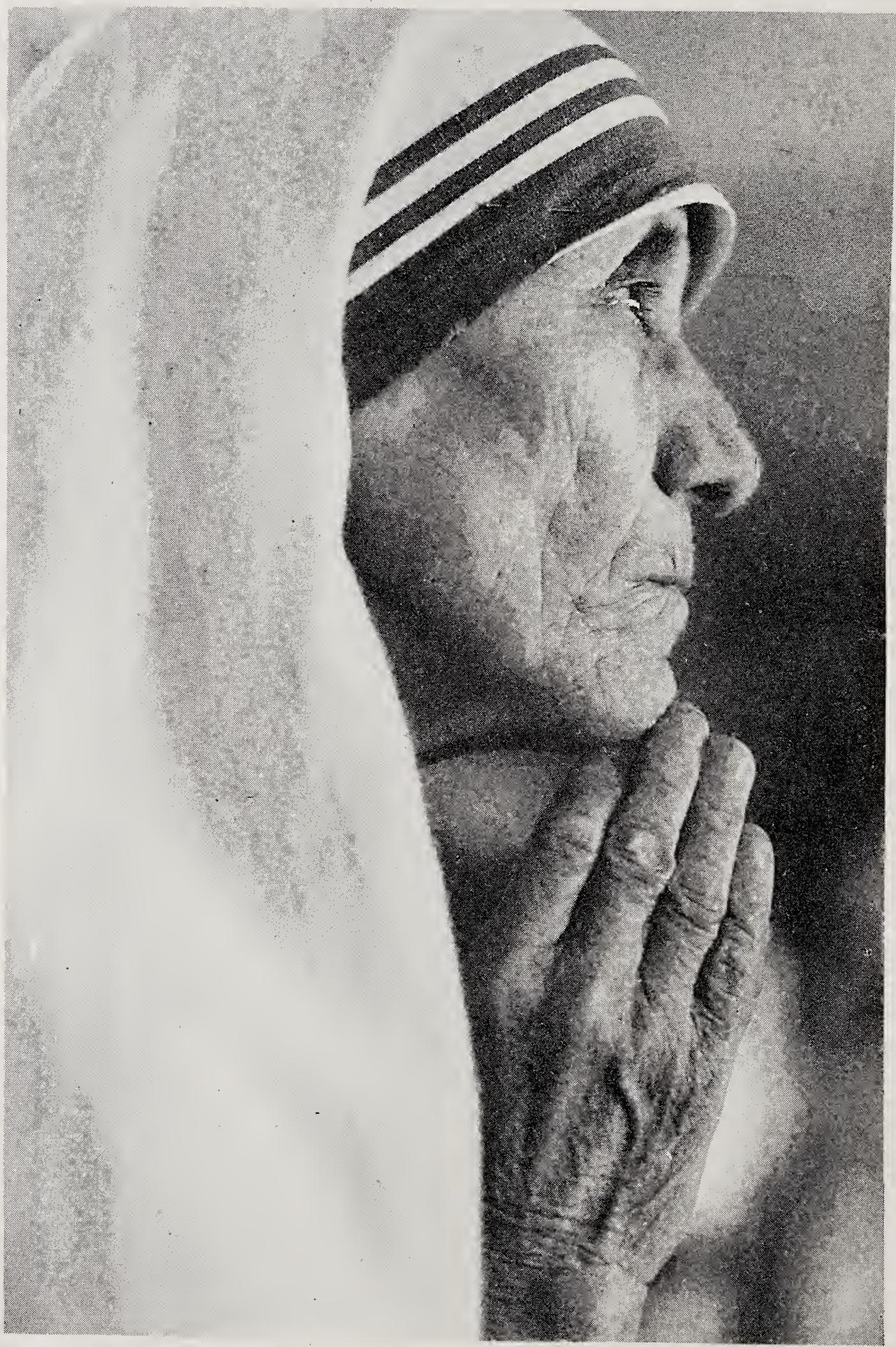
VIMLA MEHTA & VEERENDRA RAJ MEHTA



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**Photo : Raghu Rai**

# **MOTHER TERESA**

## **INSPIRING INCIDENTS**

**Vimla Mehta  
Veerendra Raj Mehta**

Cover Picture  
**M.F. Husain**



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## PREFACE

Mother Teresa's life was a saga of care, service and love and her area of work had spread even in her lifetime, to all corners of the world. Her reserves of compassion never dried up. Her work among the dying and terminally ill was something unique. The distinctive blue-bordered cotton saree of the Missionaries of Charity is today universally recognized as a harbinger of love and has become synonymous with care and comfort of the poorest of the poor.

During our fourteen-year sojourn in Manila, my wife Vimla and I were fortunate to get numerous opportunities to participate in different service activities initiated by Mother. In 1987, we had a godsend of an opportunity to work very closely with Mother when she stayed in Manila for a whole three weeks. During this period both my wife and I remained continuously associated with her different activities. We were spell bound and attracted by her work. It was during this time that we established an unbreakable bond with her. We would discuss matters concerning the daily routine of Homes and also about the welfare of Sisters. At one time, Mother sent my wife and me to her Olongapo Home and later to her Hongkong Home. At another time, she also directed us to meet the then President of Philippines Corazon Aquino to secure exemption from custom duty for the medicines received as gifts from foreign countries, for treating inmates at her various Homes.

Some people accuse Mother of religious bigotry but this is far from true. Can embracing and taking care of the unwanted, the unloved, the crippled and the detested destitutes ever be equated with any single religion? Can there be any religious name for selfless and compassionate humanitarian work amidst the squalour, filth and stench of the poor, sick and dying? Her humanitarian work had in fact transcended all faiths and religions.

Spirit of service was her main source of strength as well as energy. Her empire of humanitarian service has grown by leaps and bounds. It now resembles a mini United Nations of 121 countries! She was not only its organizational head but also its heart and soul for a full 47 years.

Mother Teresa had indeed blazed a trail as a great humanitarian.

In its citation for the Nobel Prize to Mother Teresa in 1979, the Nobel Committee said: -

“.... The loneliest, the most wretched and the dying has at her hands received compassion without condescension based on reverence for man.”

President Giri of India summed up her life thus: “She is a woman of God who embodies Christian love in action. Her humanism is the highest form of religion, the light that never fails.”

Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, an ardent admirer of Mother’s work once remarked, “To meet her is to feel utterly humble, to sense the power of tenderness, the strength of love.”

The stirring life and events and incidents of dedication with which Mother Teresa provided love, comfort and care to the despised, the sick and dying and the poor are all matters of great inspiration for the young teen-aged boys and girls. The book as a collection of many separate interesting and inspiring incidents and episodes from Mother’s life, including many from the authors’ own experiences, is an attempt to target this young, youthful and impressionable audience.

We have pleasure in now presenting to our readers the English edition titled “Mother Teresa – Inspiring Incidents”. In translating the book, every effort has been made to retain the spirit and poignancy of the incidents in the Hindi edition. The opportunity has also been used to update the book with more recent events such as the fastest ever papal decision to beatify Mother Teresa. Similarly, opportunity has also been availed to correct the few errors that had crept in the original edition.

My wife and I were together in our association with the humanitarian activities of Mother in India and abroad. Mother

would also mostly assign special tasks together to my wife and me. It is therefore fitting and appropriate that as we both wrote the book together, now she has been constantly advising me in this translation as well.

The old city names of Calcutta and Bombay have been changed in this edition to their new official names of Kolkata and Mumbai respectively.

We hope that this new edition will further enlarge the book's readership while still retaining its usefulness and relevance for the target readership of the young audience. It is also a happy coincidence that the new English edition of the book is going to the press at a time when Mother Teresa has just been "Beatified" by Pope John Paul II.

Our thanks are due to D N Gandhi, Joint Director, Smt. Shalini Narayanan, Editor, and Shri S. Mahesh, Assistant Editor, Publications Division, Government of India for their assistance in bringing out this beautiful new edition. Our thanks are also due to Shri P.N. Dwivedi for his help in the translation work. We are happy to reiterate our abiding thanks to the world famous painter and artist Shri M.F. Husain who gifted us one of his beautiful paintings of Mother for use on the cover of the book and the renowned photographer Shri Raghu Rai who too gifted us one of his striking pictures of Mother.

On the occasion of publication of this book we again respectfully bow to our highly revered Jain Muni Hastimalji Maharajsa, our late Acharya, who had always taught us the lessons of ahimsa, compassion and service.

New Delhi  
December 2003

Veerendra Raj Mehta



## FOREWORD

Mother Teresa's humanitarian work for the unwanted, the unloved, the dying and terminally ill and the poor is legendary. It is well known all over the world. Her achievements and honours are unlimited. During her lifetime and even after her death, hundreds of books have been written about her noble work. Then why one more book?

Mother's whole life is full of a whole lot of stirring events and incidents of the dedication. She provided love, comfort and care to the despised, the sick and dying and the poor persons. Her trail blazing efforts provided dignity even to the poorest of the poor and upheld their self-respect. These are all matters of great inspiration for the young teen-aged boys and girls. Yet perhaps there is hardly any book about Mother Teresa in India or elsewhere that is specially written to specifically target this young, youthful and impressionable audience. This book as a collection of many separate interesting and inspiring incidents and episodes from Mother's life, including many from the authors' own experiences, is an attempt to fill this gap.

In 1987, I was commissioned by The National Council for Education Research and Training (N.C.E.R.T) in India to write Mother's biography. I had already completed a major part of the job. As I was anxious to know even more about Mother's life including her childhood, I undertook a trip from Manila to Calcutta. I spent a number of days there with Mother trying to gather some more intimate details of her life. One day Mother abruptly said, "It will not be appropriate to write my biography while I am alive. Even biography of Jesus was not written during his lifetime - I am a mere mortal!".

All my enthusiasm evaporated. My deep veneration for Mother compelled me to break the contract with NCERT.

I was however fortunate in continuing to enjoy Mother's

affection. For the next ten years, I was witness to openings of several of her new Homes in Manila. It is only after Mother has left for her heavenly abode that I recommenced work on Mother's biography, pulling out some touching and moving gems of incidents from the depths of my memory. It was also convenient to be in Manila where I could easily access the Ramon Magsaysay Foundation and the wealth of material they have on Mother.

I was lucky to have been associated with Mother since 1975. That was the 'International Year of Women'. The Hindi magazine 'Saptahik Hindustan' was every week publishing a series of my articles on Women in Fields Considered Exclusive Preserves of Men. For the purpose, I was assigned to interview Mother at her Home at 12 Commissioner Lane in Delhi. This was my first face-to-face meeting with her. This was followed in quick succession by my visits to her 'Nirmal Hriday' Home in Calcutta and then to her many Homes in Manila in Philippines and several other countries. It very quickly transformed the initial formal and hesitant acquaintance to closeness. My first interview with Mother in Delhi was published in 'Saptahik Hindustan' and later included in my book titled 'Aaj Ki Mahilayen' (Women of Today) published in 1975. The article on Mother was later included as a Chapter in one of the textbooks published by N.C.E.R.T. for school children.

During our fourteen-year sojourn in Manila, my husband Veerendra Raj Mehta and I were fortunate to get numerous opportunities to participate in different service activities initiated by Mother. Even when I would be making my usual three or four annual visits to India, I was always drawn to Mother by some kind of an inner urge. In 1987, we had a godsend of an opportunity to work closely with Mother when she stayed in Manila for a whole three weeks. During this period both my husband and I remained continuously associated with her different activities. We were spell bound and attracted by her work. It was during this time that we established an unbreakable bond with her. We would discuss matters concerning the daily routine of Homes and also about the welfare of Sisters. At one time, Mother sent my husband and me to her Olangapo Home and at another time to her Hongkong Home. She also directed us to meet the then President of Philippines Corazon Aquino to secure exemption from custom duty for the medicines received as gifts from foreign countries, for treating

inmates at her various Homes. A highlight of this period was a long interview for Dharmayug (A well reputed national weekly publication in Hindi) that we both, along with our daughter Sandhya, had with Mother; it was published as a center-spread article in Dharmayug's issue of 19 April 1987.

Some people accuse Mother of religious bigotry but this is far from true. Mother encouraged humanitarian activities in any form. The Jaipur-based 'Bhagwan Mahaveer Vikalang Sahayata Samiti, a charitable organization for helping the disabled and engaged in free fitting of the world renowned 'Jaipur Foot' to amputees is an example. Mother always appreciated the Samiti's service to the disabled and regularly referred disabled persons to it for fitment of artificial limbs. In addition, whenever she came to Jaipur, she made every effort to visit the limb centre.

During her stay at Manila in 1987, displaying her religious tolerance she introduced me to the then President Aquino of Philippines (popularly known as Cory) saying, "Look Cory, this is Vimla. She is a Jain but she willingly works for my Homes." For her, service was religion. It did not matter to her one bit that I belonged to another faith or religion.

Can embracing and taking care of the unwanted, the unloved, the crippled and the detested destitutes ever be synonymous with any single religion? Can there be any religious name for selfless and compassionate humanitarian work amidst squalour, filth and stench of the poor, sick and dying? Had her humanitarian work not transcended all faiths and religions?

Spirit of service was her main source of strength as well as energy. It was really a miracle only of her deep inner conviction and motivation that the frail looking Mother could transform herself into a human dynamo totally dedicated to service. Her empire of humanitarian service has grown by leaps and bounds. From its humble beginnings in a rented room at 14 Creek Lane in Calcutta, this institution now covers more than 600 Homes. It now resembles a mini United Nations of 121 countries! She remained its head as well as heart and soul for a full 47 years.

My husband and I were together in our association with the humanitarian activities of Mother in India and abroad. Mother

would also mostly assign special tasks together to my husband and me. It is therefore fitting and appropriate that we have both written this book together.

In the book in relating several personal incidents, the names of some of the characters and locations have been changed to protect their identity and privacy.

In response to our special request, the world famous painter and artist M.F. Husain gifted us one of his paintings of Mother. The renowned photographer Raghu Rai too gifted us one of his beautiful pictures of Mother. Both have immensely added to the quality and beauty of this book. We are really beholden to them. Our three children Shailendra, Sandhya and Neena have been sources of constant inspiration to us in writing this book. Himself deeply involved in service of the disabled and disadvantaged, my husband's younger brother Devendra Raj Mehta also gave us continuous inspiration. From the Publications Division, Vasudha Gupta and Rajendra Bhatt extended their full co-operation in editing the book. We are grateful to all of them.

Highly revered Jain Muni Hastimalji Maharajsa, our late Acharya, had always taught us the lessons of Ahimsa, compassion and service. On the occasion of publication of this book we, along with our family, respectfully bow to him.

New Delhi

August 1999

Vimla Mehta

Dedicated to  
Shailendra, Sandhya and Neena.



# MOTHER TERESA FOR WHOM THE WHOLE WORLD IS HER ARENA<sup>1</sup>

**I**t was 19 December 1986. A large number of people had gathered at the Manila International

Airport to receive a very distinguished elderly lady. The Cathay Pacific plane had just landed. She stood out amongst the many passengers alighting from the aircraft. Frail, short-statured and clad in her very distinctive cotton sari with blue border, she moved in short measured steps.

This was Mother Teresa the living saint. Who in India is not aware of her 'Nirmal Hridaya'<sup>2</sup>? Not only in India but also in 77 countries around the world, she now has established hundreds of Homes, which provide shelter and comfort to the helpless poor, the unwanted, the uncared and the sick, as well as lepers. It is as if the whole world is her arena. This time I had seen her after years. There were a few more wrinkles on her time-ravaged face. Age had also added to the stoop. But the face had the same graceful radiance, with eyes shining as ever. It was the same zeal in her heart and the body was still as agile as ever. She moved around accepting greetings from every one present and showered her affection on everyone, with a 'God bless you'.

Mother was tired after a long journey. I thought to myself - She must rest this evening. I thus returned home. At 7.30 in the evening sister Lucina excitedly rang me up "Mother is alone. Come at once."

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<sup>1</sup> This was published on 19 April, 1987, as a center-spread article, in Dharmayug, a leading Hindi weekly from Bombay in India.

<sup>2</sup> Means 'Pure Heart' in Hindi

My husband Veerendra Raj Mehta, daughter Sandhya and I sped in our car covering the 15 km distance from our home in the elitist Makati district of Metro Manila to the Mother's Home in less than 30 minutes. We were ushered into a small, sparsely furnished room. Soon Mother entered and we wished her. She warmly greeted us and offered us seats. For some moments silence prevailed.

I was almost in a trance. I was at my wits end at finding myself so close to Mother, so unexpectedly. Shall I ever get another such opportunity during Mother's usually busy schedule? In my excitement, I had left my diary at home and was now mentally trying to recall the points I had carefully jotted it.

Mother gave us an affectionate smile. It put me at considerable ease and I felt a lot more comfortable and encouraged. I quickly came to the main issue "Mother in this Home at Delpa, many things need repair. New construction is required at some places, while some reconstruction is necessary at others"

Mother said "Come along with me. Let us see first-hand" We all followed her as she went round the Home. I was excitedly rattling off my mental list. "The roof needs repair, rusted iron wires have to be replaced with non-rusting nylon rope, old hearths are to be replaced with new ones. A terrace is to be constructed,...." I was continuing. Mother was smiling but listening carefully. She quickly agreed to all other suggestions, but for a new terrace, firmly said "No terrace will be constructed."

"Mother! terrace is a must. There is no space for children to play." Thinking that she may be worried about the funds required to carry out the work, I added, "The American Ladies Club and we, the Ladies Club of my husband's international institution, will together have it constructed."

Her answer was an even more emphatic 'No'. I looked at her face in bewilderment. Gauging my puzzled expression and disappointment, she calmly explained: "Our children come from poor localities and households and they have to go back there. I do not want them to be accustomed to a life of comfort. Then they will find it so much more difficult to go back. It is enough if we meet their minimum needs."

"Mother! In that case, can we extend the balconies to provide, to some extent, additional covered space out side the rooms? Here it rains for eight months in a year and for the other four months there is scorching heat and sunshine. In either of the seasons, it is difficult for children to come out. In addition, at the time of cleaning the rooms or spraying insecticides, we have to take the cribs and the beds out. There is not enough space to keep them. If we extend the balconies ..."

I pleaded with Mother with conviction and with all my persuasive powers. I even attempted to draw a few sketches on a blank paper and showed it to Mother. She smiled, waved away the paper sketch I had made and turning towards Sister Lucina said, "Look Sister! Note down all these things." And then all of a sudden, giving a mischievous but affectionate glance towards me added, "Sister, henceforth, she is our Chief Engineer". We all burst into laughter. Mother's humour was very touching. She continued, "Sister, when I next write a letter to you, I shall enquire, how is our Chief Engineer; then you know who to contact." I was overcome with joy.

I was now convinced that Sister was very right when she told me that in the hundreds of Homes scattered all over the world, nothing could happen without Mother's express permission. And on her part she would look at every proposal carefully and in her scheme of things, the top-most priority was always for food and medicines for the inmates of her Homes. All else was secondary and could be taken up according to convenience.

Many of the children in the Home were suffering from 'scabies', a skin disease. Mother was against using gas stoves to boil water for washing their clothes. Wherever its use was not illegal, firewood only was to be used for boiling water, as this was economical. Big hearths burning firewood were to be used for boiling water for bathing or for washing clothes. Gas and electricity could be used only for cooking meals or sterilizing syringes. Reluctantly, we obeyed Mother.

There were many doubts agitating my mind. Mother was around. It was not easy to get such an opportunity again.

"Mother! I am not a Christian, I am a Jain". "Does it matter?"

she quickly interjected, "Christianity and Jainism, both preach compassion."

"Mother you are dedicated to the service of humanity, you shower your love and affection on all. Why don't you encourage vegetarianism? Today the world over it is accepted that vegetarian food is easily affordable, it is healthy and does not rot quickly. All these reasons fully apply to India, Philippines and several other countries where you have your Homes."

Mother replied: "There are different paths to reach God. Jainism is also one of them. I respect your religion and you respect mine. I also send my limbless patients to get artificial limbs from the Bhagwan Mahaveer Vikalang Sahayata Samiti in Jaipur." And, she added with a smile "We accept whatever is offered. Everything is welcome."

"Mother! Well-to-do families here have got much fewer children. On the other hand, the poor have much larger families and most of the orphan and abandoned children come from poor localities. There is crying need for propagating family planning in such households."

After a brief moment of thought, Mother said, "People should be taught natural methods for family planning. At many places this education has been started. But I am against abortion. That is wrong."

"Mother! In our Homes shelter and food are free. Should we not encourage inmates to work?"

Mother replied "My child! We provide shelter mostly to those who are destitute, sick, aged and the orphans. After some of them recover and are fit for work and ready to go back, then you can provide them work. It is your responsibility to provide employment opportunities for them. Rehabilitation of such poor people is the duty of the society. Also, if adopted, with education orphan children can become responsible citizens. Well-to-do families can easily look after these children. Many children from our Homes are adopted abroad where they get proper education and are well looked after."

Mother was staying in the Tayuman Home of Manila. Following her normal routine, she would be out by sunrise, to

return late in the night. Mother was 77 years of age at that time. Even at that age she continued to follow such a punishing schedule. The love, comfort and relief that she provided to the destitute, the deprived and the dying were her inspiration. Their blessings were her strength. She was always on the move and new Homes just kept coming up.

On December 31 at Tayuman in Manila, a new Home was inaugurated. It was named the 'Home for Joy'. Cardinal Sin and Minister for Social Welfare, Mamita Pardo Tavera, inaugurated it. Cardinal Sin had played a major role in the non-violent Peoples' Revolution of February 1986 in the Philippines that overthrew the dictatorial President Marcos. He recited a few lines from the Bible and sprinkled holy water around. He blessed the children and met the aged and the sick.

Mother introduced us to Minister Mamita. She did not forget to point out that I was a Jain. Mother was very happy that day. At an opportune moment I had Mother autograph two of my books to preserve forever the pleasant memories of those delightful moments. Sections of both these books contain my write-ups on Mother.

Mother was well known to reach wherever there was misery, sickness and pain. She would spread the soothing and healing touch of her Homes for the sick and dying, in their own familiar local environment. At that particular time, Mother wanted to set up a new Home in Hongkong. India's Ambassador to the Philippines was trying to obtain visas for the Sisters and Mother wanted my husband to follow-up the matter with him. Ultimately this intervention was no longer necessary as Mother changed her mind and decided that there was greater need for a Home at Olangapo in the Philippines than the one at Hongkong.

7th January 1987. Mother was talking to the Sisters who had come for training from the Philippines as well as other countries. Most of them were young, fair complexioned, with blue and brown eyes and clad in white sarees, but without the distinctive blue border. The strict rules of the Order stipulated that the blue-bordered saree could be earned only after nine of years of rigorous training and dedicated service, sacrifice and commitment.

8th January 1987. Time was 9 a.m. There was hectic activity in Tayuman. Hundreds of people had gathered. It was the last day of Mother's visit to Manila. She was to leave for Singapore at 3.30 p.m. the same afternoon.

At 9.45 a.m. there was considerable commotion. President Corazon Aquino (popularly known by her countrymen as Cory) of the Philippines had arrived. She was in her distinctive yellow dress. Press photographers and T.V. cameramen from leading TV channels and newspaper groups were already there to cover the visit of this immensely popular leader. Unmoved by this flurry of activity, Mother was absolutely calm and detached. She neither rushed to receive the President nor did she show any excitement. She was indifferent to the flurry, and continued unruffled with her activities. Everyone was equal for her and deserved and received the same affection. Irrespective of their societal status, all were equally important to her. It was perhaps only because of this transparent universal love, simplicity and deep commitment to service that people around the world trusted her with donations of millions of rupees without any strong financial base. People of different faiths and nationalities used to bow before her. Heads of States saluted her. Her affection was equal for everyone. She blessed Cory in response to her greetings.

Cory and Mother together went round all the three Homes at Tayuman and visited the sick and dying persons, young and old. Cory was happy. Mother had come to provide relief to the uncared and the destitute of her country.

To see Mother off at Manila's international airport, we had already obtained special permission to go inside the security area, up to the aircraft. We accompanied Mother to the V.V.I.P. lounge. As the time of her boarding approached, everyone present was teary eyed. Mother was giving last minute instructions. Then, as we were leaving the lounge I had an unusual but very memorable experience. Mother embraced me. She also gave me a pendant as a small gift. I was overwhelmed with emotion and touched my forehead with the gift.

That gift from Mother is still with me. I am unable to decide whether I should wear it round my neck, frame it or put it in a locker lest someone steals it.

## ST. FRANCIS OF ASSISI

**M**other often used to acknowledge that her life had been deeply influenced by St. Francis of Assisi.

St. Francis of Assisi was born in 1181 in the Assisi province of Italy. The family name of Francis was Geowani Bernadon Francisco. His father Petro Bernadon was a rich trader. He affectionately used to call his son by the pet name 'Siso'.

All children of Siso's age were going to school. But Siso's heart was not in studies. Inspite of the best efforts of his father, Siso never took his studies seriously. Seeing his lack of interest in studies, his father initiated Siso into their family business, trying to teach him the skills of running a successful and profitable business.

Siso had no interest in business as well. He somehow passed his day at the business establishment and eagerly looked forward to be with his friends in the evening. He would always be very happy to open his purse for his friends. An affluent father never allowed his son to be short of money !

In those days, civil wars were common in Italy. In those conditions, Siso always sided with the truth. Once during the war Siso was jailed. In prison his health deteriorated and he was in very poor health when he was released from prison after a year.

One day while he was riding a horse, Siso came across a beggar. The whole body of the beggar was terribly afflicted with leprosy. Siso gave all the money in his purse to the beggar. To his surprise, Siso found that he was still having a somewhat blank and thankless pathetic look on his face. Siso wondered why money was not enough to comfort or satisfy the needs of this beggar? Siso felt that, perhaps, more than the money the beggar needed love, care and treatment.

Siso dismounted from his horse and approached the beggar. He found that the beggar was alone. His family had abandoned him because of his deadly affliction. Many unfortunate lepers like him were similarly wandering without any help. Siso felt an intense inner pain and deeply pondered over this aspect.

Soon enough, Siso followed his inner urge. He resolved to comfort the lepers by spending most of his time with them. Siso started living with the lepers. To his surprise he found that ever since he started living with lepers like a recluse and without money, his friends deserted him one by one.

In 1206, at the age of 25 his father made another effort to kindle Siso's interest in business. He sent him to Folitano city for business. Many items loaded on horse carts were sent with him. Trading of those items generated huge profits. Siso also sold the empty horse carts, also at great profit. Finally he sold his horse too for double the purchase price. Siso invested all the money from the sale proceeds and profits in buying gold. Thereafter, alone, he set out with a bag full of gold slung on his shoulder.

On his way he came across the old church of St. Damiano. The church was in ruins. Siso offered prayers in that dilapidated church. He saw many lepers living there in the church ruins.

Vineyards of affluent people making costly wines and making huge profits surrounded the Church. Siso felt deep agony in his heart. Amidst all this wealth, there was not a single hospital for lepers in Italy. The church too was in a dilapidated state. Siso instantly resolved to live amongst the lepers there, never to return home again.

Siso handed over all the gold to the aged priest for reconstruction of the church. Soon reconstruction commenced and Siso and the priest devoted themselves fully to this task.

Petro, Siso's father was livid with rage when he got the news of Siso's activities. The Bishop of Italy was also angry with the priest as the reconstruction of the church was undertaken without his permission. Siso's view was that Bishop's permission was not necessary for reconstruction when the Bishop had abdicated his responsibility for the upkeep of the dilapidated church.

The Bishop and Petro reached the church. An angry Petro instigated the Bishop. Petro told Siso "All this money is mine. You have no claim on it."

Though Siso had worked hard in his short business trip in Folitano to earn handsome profits, he accepted the dictates of his father and returned all the money to him. He was disgusted with his father's conduct and did not want to own anything belonging to him. In a dramatic gesture, he also stepped out of the costly dress he was wearing and promptly returned the same to his father. To cover himself, he was only too happy to borrow a piece of tattered cloth from a leper there.

His father had expected that without money, Siso's resolve would crumble and he would return home but that did not happen. Siso chose to live amongst the lepers and forever gave up the life of luxury of his father's house.

Siso restarted the work of church reconstruction by begging for one beautiful stone from each household. People were glad to help him. Many people also offered some money along with stones. They also provided him with food. Sometimes old clothes were also received in donation.

When he was tired after begging for stones and transporting them, he sat down to have some rest and respite. Even during this period he would dress the wounds of the lepers and provide solace to them with compassion and sweet words. Siso became very popular amongst the lepers.

The lepers were also inspired to dedicate themselves to the mission of rebuilding the church. They discovered a new aim in life. They started collecting stones with renewed vigour. Along with Siso, they too carried stones on their backs and offered prayers to god.

A wealthy father of one of Siso's friends was very disappointed and disillusioned with his children. His children quarreled amongst themselves for his wealth. One night the dejected father suddenly decided to join Siso and hand over all his wealth to him. He wanted half of his wealth to be utilized for rebuilding the church and the balance to be used for building a hospital for the lepers.

This unusual incident became the talk of the town. Siso got a good companion that redoubled his enthusiasm in the work he had started.

Their third companion was a young doctor. He was grief stricken with the death of his wife in an accident. He found solace by participating in the work started by Siso. He had no child and gave all his money to Siso. By immersing himself in the treatment of lepers, he overcame and forgot his own grief. The three friends together formed an organization giving it the name 'Poor Brothers of Assisi'. This organization was focused exclusively on service and construction.

Impressed by the noble activities of the 'Poor Brothers of Assisi', some more people joined the organization, increasing the number of its members to 12.

These twelve members divided themselves into groups of two each and started traveling to different parts of Italy and preaching the message of love and service. Feeling threatened by their growing popularity, the Bishop of Italy banned their teaching.

Siso was aware that he could not effectively carry on his work in Italy without the approval of the church. He therefore left Italy along with his associates. Even after that, the Bishop did not leave them in peace. Wherever they went they were hounded.

Siso and his companions then came to the Vatican in Rome. There they met the influential Cardinal Colona. In a very simple and direct manner Siso explained the aims and activities of his organization. The Cardinal was impressed. He permitted Siso and his organization to carry on with their work and also allowed them to preach. With no further impediments, the Order started to blossom.

In the meantime, Siso was getting more and more captivated by nature. He was fascinated by the beauty of the rising sun, the smiling moon, the flowering trees, the wandering animals and the chirping birds. He enjoyed sitting amongst wild creatures in the forest. In his preachings, Siso would emphasize: "It is wrong to cage animals and birds". Killing of animals and birds pained him. He became a vegetarian.

Gradually the Church came to terms with this emerging organization. In the meanwhile, the number of its followers had increased to over 1200. The Order was given a new name 'Franciscons'. Siso's name was proposed to head this organization but he declined this honour. The tiring and strenuous efforts until then had totally sapped his energy. Another person was therefore selected and assigned this responsibility.

Soon Siso fell ill. During his illness he composed beautiful prayers extolling the grace of God. Now he spent his days in a hut made of mud, outside the hospital for the lepers. He was dying. In October 1226, in the midst of lepers, at the age of only 45 he breathed his last.

Mother Teresa's life was greatly inspired by and surprisingly similar to the compassionate life of St. Francis. Mother had especially adopted the prayers of St. Francis. Like him, Mother too set up a new organization. She too embraced and comforted the sick and dying persons, disowned and abandoned by society. Like St. Francis, initially Mother's Order also operated outside the traditional Church hierarchy. Both were eventually given permission to so operate by the Pope. Ultimately their magnificent work made them both immortal.

## **STEALING OF SWEETS - THE LIGHTS GO OUT**

**M**other Teresa had a very pleasant childhood. She was brought up under the loving and affectionate care of her Albanian parents and her siblings. Born as Agnes, she was a healthy and beautiful child with a fair and pink complexion. She was affectionately called Gonxha which means 'flower bud'.

Gonxha's elder brother Lazar was very fond of sweets, cakes, jam, chocolates etc. Never satisfied with his own share given by his mother, he was always on the lookout to steal sweets.

Whenever mother retired to her bedroom, Lazar would quietly sneak into the kitchen. He would steal cake, pastry, chocolates etc. If nothing else was available he would even eat jam. Gonxa's elder sister was also tempted to follow Lazar. The two wanted to involve their younger sister Gonxha too but she did not like all this. This was because their mother had taught them: "Anything done stealthily is improper. God with his thousand eyes always observes everything."

Gonxha the child never became an accomplice of her elder brother and sister in the stealing game. Once after midnight on a Saturday, Gonxha found both of them eating cake to their fill. She reprimanded them reminding them, "Mother has said that if you have to attend 'Mass' in the morning, nothing should be eaten after 12 of the previous night." The brother and sister paid no heed to her words. However, she never complained to her mother because mother also used to say that complaining about others was a bad habit. The young girl was greatly influenced by the views of her mother. The innocent little girl always looked up to her as her role model as her father had died when she was only seven.

One day mother was disturbed when she found her three children playing with a wicked and mischievous boy of the neighbourhood. She devised a method to subtly convey a message to children. She purchased a basket of apples from the market and also brought along a rotten apple lying on the street. The same night the mother sat with the three children. She asked young Gonxha to place the rotten apple in the midst of fresh apples. The basket was closed with a lid and then it was kept aside. The children looked on curiously but did not have the courage to ask the purpose.

A few days later mother called for the basket of apples. The lid was removed in the presence of all the three children. All the apples had rotted away.

Mother pointed out, "My dear children! One rotten apple spoils all the other apples that come in contact with it. Similarly one child with bad habits can spoil all the children who come in contact with that child." After that day, all of them were careful to make friends with only nice and well-behaved children.

After the death of Gonxha's father Nicholas Bojaxhiu, mother had to practice considerable austerity in bringing up the children and educating them. Nicholas was a famous contractor and had left them a house and a thriving business. A theatre built by him still exists in Skopje city of Yugoslavia. However, Nicholas' partner misappropriated the money in business and Gonxha's mother was left with nothing but the house.

Gonxha's mother was very good at embroidery. She started a small business of embroidered clothes. With her hard work, honesty and pleasant dealings, her business thrived. It facilitated the bringing up of her three children. She was very frugal and would always try to conserve, whether it was electricity or water or even clothes. She did not like wastage in any form. She wanted her children never to feel the absence of their father. Once in a while she would allow the children to do as they pleased. For example, sometimes on a night preceding a holiday, the three children were allowed to play carrom till late in the night. Even after that, the children would be allowed to continue gossiping for some more time.

One night, Gonxha was chatting with her brother and sister about her friends in a carefree manner. She was also hilariously mimicking her teacher who frequently scolded children. This was greeted by peals of laughter. Mother who was busy doing her embroidery in the adjoining room overheard the conversation.

Suddenly, the lights in the children's room went out. The children were perplexed, as there was light both in the street as well as the neighbourhood. They went to mother's room and found that it too was lighted.

Mother calmly explained, "I have deliberately switched off the light. I do not like spending money on electricity for criticizing or mimicking others. Use of electricity for such flippant and undesirable chatter is its clear misuse."

Mother added, "Talking about the personal life of someone else or criticizing it is unbecoming of civilized persons." The children had learnt an important lesson for life.

Gonxha's mother had brought up the children with love even while being a stern disciplinarian. The later life of Gonxha was very much influenced by such impressions and memories of her childhood. She imbibed the value of austerity, simplicity and humility in life. Her mother's character left a deep imprint on the life of child Gonxha. These virtues acquired by Gonxha always guided and inspired her when she grew up to become Mother Teresa.

## EXTRAORDINARY COINCIDENCES

There are many unusual and interesting co-incidences associated with the birth of Mother Teresa. Mother Teresa was born in 1910, the year in which Florence Nightingale died. One is reminded of the childhood reading of the 'Lady with the Lamp'. During the Crimean war, Florence was engaged day and night in the care of wounded soldiers. All doctors and staff members used to go for rest. But for her, the only form of rest was dressing of the wounds of soldiers. A lamp was always in her hand. She used to search for the wounded soldiers needing her help. She used to arrange water for the thirsty, food for the hungry and medical aid for the sick. Florence Nightingale often got so engrossed in the service of the sick that she would not even notice when day had become night and night was about to give way to dawn. Mother Teresa was similarly totally devoted to selfless service of sick persons found on the pavements and in huts.

Mother Teresa was born in the year in which Florence Nightangle left for her heavenly abode. Many followers and well-wishers of Mother, having faith in the theory of rebirth, believe that Florence was reborn as Mother Teresa. For both service of humanity was supreme. In the history of the world, the names of Florence Nightingale and Mother Teresa will always find a place of honour in the list of persons totally dedicated to selfless service.

Some people believe that Mother Teresa selected her name after nun Teresa, who was born 400 years ago. She became a nun at the age of 10 and was associated with the Carmel convent of Spain. For about 30 years she whole-heartedly led the life of a nun. But she did not like Spain's environment of religious bigotry and wanted to emphasize service activities as well.

Linking religion with service was a new concept and nun Teresa faced considerable opposition and resistance from her

colleagues. In the end she left the monastery with the permission of the Pope. In a similar manner, inspired by the spirit and call for service, Mother Teresa too left Loreto Convent with the permission of the Pope.

After leaving the convent, nun Teresa returned to her birthplace in the Avila city in Spain. At that time she had only three or four nuns with her. Gradually people were attracted to her ideas. Mother Teresa may have been inspired by nun Teresa's work and in changing her childhood name Agnes to Sister Teresa. According to the rules of the Loreto convent, every sister had to change her name after she was admitted into the institution. It symbolized a break from the past life and entry into a new life in the Order.

After Agnes opted for the new name, she was known as Sister Teresa. The prefix Mother got added to her name much later. When was "Mother" added to her name? Mother smiles at this question and her eyes sparkle. When she looks into your eyes this affectionate sparkle travels deep into your heart and you get the answer you are looking for - one showering affection universally is Mother!

Some believe that Mother had chosen this name after St. Therese of Lisieux. Who was this other Therese? She was a nun of the convent of France. She died while she was young. She was called 'tender flower' just as Mother Teresa in her childhood was known as Gonxha, meaning a flower bud. In 1927, young Therese was declared a saint within a very short period of 28 years of her death in 1897. Will the Vatican similarly accelerate declaration of Sainthood for Mother Teresa?

Another person whose life has surprising similarities with the life of Mother Teresa is Sister Nivedita. Both were women from foreign countries who had, of their own choice, made India their home. Both were teachers. Both had given up teaching out of their longing for service. Both liked Calcutta city.

The Himalayas had special significance in the lives of both Mother Teresa and Sister Nivedita. It was while traveling in a train in the foothills of Himalayas near Darjeeling on 10 September 1946 that Mother had her Call of Conscience. The Call was,

"Dedicate yourself to the service of grief stricken people." The fresh cool breeze and the beauty of the sun's rays falling on the snow-clad Himalayan peaks provided an apt backdrop for intense soul-searching by Mother. She quickly made her decision. She peeped out of the window as if holding the snow-white peaks witness and pledged to devote the rest of her life to the service of the poorest of the poor. This became the guiding truth and motto for the rest of her life. As the train raced on, leaving behind the beautiful mountain peaks, Mother also decided to give up her life of comfort to move ahead in life to fulfill her inner call. She had discovered the truth on which her later life was anchored.

In the same manner, some 35 years earlier, sister Nivedita too had discovered the truth of life in the silence of the serene Himalayan mountains. It was the same truth - the beckoning of the spirit of service. Sister Nivedita studied the Vedas and other scriptures and came to the conclusion that only service was supreme. This was the eternal truth that she too imbibed and practised throughout her life.

It was an exceptionally hot day in Kolkata in April 1889. The city was in the grip of plague at that time. Swami Vivekanand had entrusted the task of preventing the spread of plague as well as service and treatment of the afflicted to his favourite disciple, Nivedita. Sanitation services had collapsed. One fine day, people were startled to see the unusual sight of a fair-skinned foreign lady scavenging with a broom the dirty street of Bag Bazar. Young men from the upper sections of society hung their heads in shame. Their conscience was jolted. They quickly moved forward and took away the broom from Nivedita. Now instead of her, they started scavenging the street and at that moment a sanitation campaign had been ushered in Kolkata.

Hundreds and thousands of people afflicted with plague were stinking with dysentery, cholera and vomits. There was a filthy odour of disease and death all around. Nivedita endeavoured to comfort the sick and dying. After removing the dead bodies from the decrepit hutments, Nivedita would herself undertake to disinfect the homes by painting the walls with lime to protect the survivors from the contagion. A touching narration of the pain and suffering of the children during that plague is included in an article titled "Plague" in Sister Nivedita's book 'Studies from an Eastern Home'.

Like Sister Nivedita, Mother Teresa also sincerely served the despised lepers and comforted and cared for the sick, the dying and the abandoned persons with love and affection. One could often hear Mother say "He had a beautiful smile on his face ..... He died a beautiful death .....". "Mother! Can death too be beautiful?" I ask her. "Yes! It can be." She says with conviction. "Will death not be beautiful if a person dying on account of sickness, penury or loneliness finally gets some love and affection?"

Nivedita died in the lap of the Himalayas. Indian literature, culture, philosophy and the penance of sages and saints have all flourished in the Himalayas. Here, even in her last moments Sister Nivedita welcomed death saying, "Death is blissful" while chanting her favourite hymn "Rudra Stuti". The most significant day in the life of Mother i.e., the 'Inspiration Day' when she received her Call of Conscience was also linked with the same Himalayas.

Do the reflections of Mother Teresa in the lives of Florence Nightingale, Saint Therese and Sister Nivedita signify only strange co-incidences? Or, are these instances of rebirth? Or is it something else? Different persons have different theories. In any case, there is no doubt that "service to humanity" was central to the lives of all of them.

## I AM INDIA'S - INDIA IS MINE

**10** September 1946 was the day for Mother to take a final decision. In a sense, that very day 'Missionaries of Charity' had come into being. This is an event from those initial days of her struggle. The dispensary at Moti Jheel required some medicines. Michael knew the owner of one of the medical shops. On the strength of this acquaintance, Mother hoped to get some medicines for free for her dispensary. She and Michael set out from 14 Creek Lane to go to the medical shop. They boarded a tram, it being the most economical public transport system for local travel.

The tram was overcrowded. Mother and Michael were seated on one side. Seeing a foreigner in their midst, the persons on the opposite side kept staring at Mother. They were curious. It was an unusual sight for them to see a fair complexioned foreign woman dressed in a saree wearing a cross. Some people were looking at this young nun as if she were a piece from a museum. They were also uninhibited in expressing their views in the local Bengali language in the belief that she did not understand the language.

One said this woman had come from abroad to render service. Another commented that she had come to proselytize in the garb of service. A third man commented that this nun was there to convert people in the name of religion. Yet another person did not hesitate to go to the extent of saying that this foreign lady was misleading people by wearing an Indian saree and trying to appear as one of us. Mother listened quietly to these mostly disparaging comments for some time. She understood all of them. She was fluent in Bengali language. She had taught girls at St. Mary's School through the Bengali medium. She was well versed in both the ordinary language of a common man of settlements like Moti Jheel as also the language of the upper echelons of society. Mother understood every word of the freewheeling conversation that went on. Mother was upset but remained calm and composed. Michael

too was very much outraged by the persistent derogatory comments and taunts but he too held himself back.

When the taunts showed no signs of abating, suddenly Mother rose from her seat and in a firm but calm tone said in Bengali, "Aami Bharter, Bharat Aaamar" (I am India's, India is mine). People were stunned. They felt deeply embarrassed and were shocked into silence. When necessary, the apostle of humility could also become firm like a rock. This firmness of her character enabled her to handle many a difficult situation in her public life.

She would proudly say to her detractors, "I am an Indian by choice whereas you are an Indian only by accident (of birth)". Later, the same citizens of Kolkata were proud to claim this nun of foreign origin as their own and at her being an Indian. They were delighted to acclaim her as the 'Bengali Teresa' of India.

As a child, Agnes was attracted towards India even from the tender age of 12. She used to be involved in parish activities at the Sodality of the Blessed Virgin Mary in Scopje city in Yugoslavia. Here she used to learn about the lives of Yugoslav missionaries in Kolkata who used to write letters to their colleagues in Scopje city. These letters read out at the Sodality carried long descriptions of Kolkata. Accounts of service activities of the Jesuit Missionaries at the beautiful sites of Kurseong and Darjeeling deeply impressed Mother Teresa in her childhood. The beautiful description of Kolkata too left an indelible impression on the heart and mind of young Agnes that lasted throughout her life. Even though she would travel all over the world for her humanitarian work, Mother always longed to return to Kolkata, the central place of her activities. India was her country. Kolkata was her home. She belonged to Kolkata and Kolkata belonged to her. Mother Teresa was proud of her being an Indian by choice. She always upheld the dignity of her adopted country.

The following moving incident would make any Indian hold his or her head high with pride. A top industrialist from Switzerland had called on Mother. He was rich and owned several banks and companies. He had heard a lot about the humanitarian work of Mother. He was deeply touched when he saw the Homes for himself during his India visit. He was eager to extend financial help for Mother's efforts. He however wanted to impress. He egotistically

said, "I have enormous money. I own a number of companies. I donate large amounts for the welfare of the poor. I wish to give a large amount to you also. The donation given by me would enable you to set up many Homes for the aged. You would rarely find a large donor like me."

Mother did not at all like the arrogant and condescending tone of this wealthy Swiss. Ordinarily, Mother was never shy to ask for the donation of love and compassion. But in this case she was uneasy as she calmly listened to these boastful statements. She felt as if the conceited Swiss capitalist was saying, "You starving people - take this and satisfy your hunger with my money." His talk was bereft of any compassion or love or respect for human dignity. It was like contemptuously throwing crumbs of bread to the poor. Mother firmly asserted, "There are many people in my India who donate money. I get abundant money accompanied with love that is enough to run my Homes. There is no dearth of money in our country. You may like to use your wealth to open a few old age Homes in your own country. You must first undertake such an activity in your own country. God is kind to us. We have enough for our activities in India." With these words, Mother swiftly turned her back and got busy in her activities.

Mother, an Indian by her own volition, and one who started with just five rupees when she left Loreto convent, had upheld the dignity of India before a foreign millionaire.

## THE DAY MOTHER HAD TO FACE PROSECUTION

This was the time when Mother Teresa was still the Principal of St. Mary's school. Subhashini Das was one of her favourite students in Class VII. She remained with Mother throughout her life. After completing her education she became a nun. She had the distinction of being the first assistant and disciple of Mother Teresa. By virtue of her long association with Mother until her death, Subhashini was always associated with and fully privy to all the important decisions for the management of the huge empire of the Missionaries of Charity.

But her journey from student days to becoming Mother's first disciple and Sister was not easy. She had to face stiff resistance from her family as well as the society. She had adopted of her own volition the arduous path of service after forsaking the life and comfort of an affluent family.

On 28 February 1949, Mother left Loreto Convent and sought refuge in the house of Michael Gomez at 14 Creek Lane in Kolkata. Mother had been at this place for only a month when Subhashini knocked at her door.

Those were the days before Missionaries of Charity was formed. Subhashini at that time was a student of class XI. She was a close to Mother even at that time and was the only one who had some inkling of Mother's intentions when Mother resigned from the post of Principal of Loreto Convent. Subhashini was made the monitor of the teams that Mother would form from time to time to inspire students to help the children in poor localities, even while pursuing their studies. Every Saturday afternoon, students from the higher classes would go to teach children in the locality. The students taught alphabets and some music to the children.

One day Subhashini asked Mother Teresa, "You always preach

to us to serve and help the poor. We want to do this work and devote a few hours every day for it. But we need a guide and leader. Why don't you become our Chief?" Mother with a smile put one finger of her right hand on her lips and affectionately said, "Shh...Quiet." Subhashini instinctively knew that Mother was engaged in intense introspection. But she remained quiet. There was no alternative for Subhashini but to wait for the things to unfold in due course. In the meanwhile, she and the other students continued with their humanitarian activities.

It was the first week of March. From Michael Gomez's home, Mother sent a small note to her favourite student. Soon, Subhashini knocked at her door. Mother embraced her and asked, "Are you ready for service?" Subhashini had been anxiously waiting for this moment. She promptly replied, "I am ready. What are the instructions?"

But an unfortunate incident took place before the day was fixed. Subhashini belonged to an upper-class Bengali family that followed the tradition of marrying girls before they finished their education. Her marriage was arranged with a boy from a respected family, while she was still in eleventh class. Preparations for marriage were to commence. At this stage Subhashini politely told her parents that she would not marry. She was to leave this mundane life to lead a pious life devoted to service of the poor. She also made it clear that she was to associate herself closely with Mother Teresa.

Family members were stunned. For them these ideas were sacrilegious and new. Her parents, brothers and sisters and relatives tried to dissuade her but all was in vain. Subhashini was determined to follow her own decision. Family members met Mother Teresa. Mother politely said, "Subhashini must be given the right to choose her own course of life. It should be her own decision if she wants to lead a family life or would like to spend her life in service activities. In either case, my blessings would be with her." She added, "In fact I would like that she should take some more time to make up her mind. Her decision must be the call of her own conscience."

Subhashini remained firm in her resolve. She had taken the decision, backed by both her head and heart. But family members

had not given up hope yet. Things moved on. Discussions continued. There were angry exchanges also. But it was all to no avail.

When nothing seemed to work, family members consulted a top lawyer. The family finally took the matter to court. Both Mother Teresa and Subhashini were made the accused. Both were deeply anguished by turn of events.

The Court fixed a date for its final order. It was a very touching scene. On one side were members of family and friends of Subhashini and on the other side Subhashini and Mother, all anxiously but calmly awaiting the order of the court. Maria, daughter of Michael Gomez, accompanied Mother. The courtroom was packed. People were curious to listen to the judgment in that extra ordinary case. Parents had initiated prosecution against their own daughter!

The Judge looked towards the main accused in the case. Young Subhashini was bitterly weeping on Mother's shoulder. Her sobs were echoing in the courtroom. Mother comforted her. She had one hand on the head of her student while with the other she was holding both her hands. The girl who later became Mother's first disciple was clinging tightly to Mother, like a shivering calf being driven to a slaughterhouse clinging to its mother. Pointing towards Subhashini the Judge said, "There does not seem to be any need for me to pronounce my judgement. After looking at this young girl, members of her family and well-wishers should make their own decision." To make his meaning abundantly clear, the Judge added, "The decision would depend on the will of Subhashini. She is a major and she should be allowed to exercise her right."

Her relatives and friends now realized the implications of the judge's comments. Mother Teresa held Subhashini and stood up. Maria supported her on the other side. The three slowly came out of the court. Subhashini wore a relieved but happy look on her face. Many people in the court were teary eyed. The case filed by the parents against their daughter was over. The threesome turned towards 14-Creek Lane.

Mother fixed 19 March as the day for Subhashini to start her new life. It was the day of St. Joseph's feast. On that day Mother Teresa recorded in her diary.

"Today is a very auspicious day. Subhashini Das has joined our small congregation. We had gone to the hall for prayers. We prayed for the welfare of our Order. Subhashini Das is very innocent, pure and smiling. May god always keep her this way."

Out of her deference for Mother, Subhashini assumed Mother's childhood name of Agnes. Thereafter she has always been Sister Agnes only, a shy little woman with an iron will. She shared a lasting friendship with Mother and remained the second most important person in the Missionaries of Charity.

## A PRIME MINISTER'S REQUEST AND A PRESIDENT'S TEARS

**M**issionaries of Charity was established on 7th October, 1950.

For years Mother had been celebrating Christmas in Kolkata with the orphans, aged and disabled. The Christmas of 1950 was very significant for Mother. It was the first Christmas after the establishment of the congregation.

This year the celebrations were being arranged at the Government House in Kolkata. The then Governor of West Bengal, Dr. Mukherjee had accepted the invitation of Mother to attend the celebrations. In cosmopolitan Calcutta it was the festive atmosphere of Christmas.

That very day Pandit Jawahar Lal Nehru, the then Prime Minister of India was to arrive in Kolkata. India had become independent three years earlier. After independence all religious festivals of different faiths were celebrated in the country with great gaiety and fanfare. Pandit Nehru had been informed that Mother was organizing special Christmas celebrations on that day in Kolkata.

As celebrations were about to commence and Governor Mukherjee was to inaugurate them, a message was received on the wireless. It was from no less than the Prime Minister of India himself to Mother Teresa. He was seeking Mother's permission to attend the celebrations!

It was a strange and unusual contradiction. The immensely popular leader of independent India and the Prime Minister, the head of the government of the country, was seeking permission of a frail looking and diminutive nun to attend the festivities being organized by her for the poor.

Mother was pleasantly surprised by this message. She herself

spoke to Pandit Nehru on the telephone and said, "Please do come, we will greet you with love. These children would feel highly elated to be in the company of the country's highly admired and loved Prime Minister. They may scarcely believe that Pandit Jawahar Lal Nehru is coming to share with them the joyful moments of Christmas."

Pandit Nehru was always very happy in the midst of children. Because of his love for them, the children of India affectionately called him Chacha<sup>3</sup> Nehru. As soon as he arrived, he freely intermingled with the children. The young ones from all regions and faiths such as Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, Jain, Christian and Chinese were extremely happy to be frolicking with him.

The then Foreign Minister Shri Krishna Menon was also with the Prime Minister. He was by nature a shy person, not normally known for easily mixing with children. When he saw his Prime Minister playfully joining the children in their festivities, he was also tempted to join. He could think of nothing better than to affectionately hold the nose of a Chinese girl and playfully pull it. For the girl this was painful and she started crying.

Mother Teresa was watching the whole episode. She tactfully rescued Shri Menon from embarrassment. She stepped forward and embraced the girl and said, "My dear child! You are very pretty but your nose is flat. Our Foreign Minister was trying to make it sharper." Hearing this the crying girl forgot her pain and burst into laughter. Shri Menon too gave a big sigh of relief. Pandit Nehru jokingly told Shri Menon, "Looks like your nose has been overstretched!" Every body present burst into laughter.

Nehru Ji<sup>4</sup> always extended full co-operation to Mother's activities. When Mother's first Home was opened in Delhi in 1960, the Prime Minister himself was to inaugurate it. Two days before the appointed date, he however fell ill. His office, in a routine manner and without his knowledge, sent a message that some other V.I.P. would be deputed in his stead.

On the day of the inauguration, although Pandit Nehru was still unwell, he got up. Despite his weakness he went for the

<sup>3</sup> Chacha in Hindi means Uncle.

<sup>4</sup> In India, to show respect to a person, "Ji" added to the name.

inauguration ceremony. Mother Teresa received Nehru Ji and said, "If you permit, I would like to briefly explain to you the activities of our organization."

Nehru Ji replied, "No Mother, your Missionaries of Charity needs no introduction. I know it very well. That is the reason why I am here." He added - "Not only me but the whole country is aware of the humanitarian work that you and your institution have done in the last ten years."

In 1960, Pandit Nehru proposed to President Rajendra Prasad the name of Mother Teresa for award of one of India's highest civilian decorations, the 'Padma Shri'. President Prasad wholeheartedly endorsed the suggestion.

When Mother Teresa was informed about the proposed award of Padma Shri to her, she declined the honour. She felt that even though she had devoted 14 years to the service of the poor, sick and the dying, she did not deserve this honour. She was of the view that she was working in the service of God and it was not proper to get rewarded for the work done for God. She again declined the proposed award in 1961.

The Archbishop of Kolkata reasoned with Mother, "Mother! You must accept this award. This is an honour for the service of the poor. In a sense this is acceptance of poor people by the affluent society. It is important that rich people know about the poor." Mother grudgingly accepted the advice of the Archbishop as a command.

Mother finally accepted the award in 1962. It was for the first time that the Padma Shri was awarded to a person not born in India.

The site for the majestic investiture ceremony was the Durbar hall of the Rashtrapati Bhawan (the President's House) in New Delhi. The ceremony was being held with great pomp and pageantry in the midst of glittering chandeliers and floral decorations. In the illuminated hall, Mother was calmly seated along with other awardees. The other invitees included a galaxy of top dignitaries of the country.

Mrs. Vijay Laxmi Pandit, former President of the United Nations and sister of Pandit Nehru, was also there. She has given a moving account of this ceremony. In her own words, "The magnificent Durbar Hall of the Rashtrapati Bhawan became silent when the sari-clad nun, a picture of humility, walked upto the dais. She took the award as if she were taking a sick child or dying man in her arms. It meant nothing more than that to her- but the hall went mad. Mother Teresa received the loudest applause." The packed Durbar Hall was overjoyed at the sight of the apostle of compassion. President Dr. Rajendra Prasad also had tears in his eyes, while decorating Mother with the Padma Shri. It was an extra-ordinary scene when the President, the highest constitutional authority of the country, felt so moved that he had no shame in a public display of his emotions or tears. The presence of Mother Teresa had touched the hearts of all present.

After the ceremony, Mrs. Vijay Laxmi Pandit and her brother Prime Minister Jawahar Lal Nehru traveled back home in the same car. On the way, Vijay Laxmi Pandit asked her brother about the emotion-filled scene of Mother Teresa accepting the Padma Shri award. "Wasn't that a moving thing?", Pandit Nehru said. "I do not know how you felt, but I had great difficulty in restraining my tears. May God grant her health and long life."

## MOTHER'S SCHOOL

After completing her training as a nurse at Holy family Hospital at Patna, in December 1948 Mother returned to Kolkata. Immediately, she went to Father Henry and apprised him of her intention to start her work of serving the poor in the locality of Moti Jheel. Even though she did not know its whereabouts, Mother chose this settlement, as it was inhabited by some of the poorest people in Kolkata. Unashamed of her ignorance of the location, she asked Father Henry himself for directions to reach that locality.

Father Henry smiled and said, "Moti Jheel is situated right behind the Loreto Convent where you had earlier taught." However, Mother did not know how to reach the Loreto Convent as well. During her teaching days, she almost always commuted between her home and the Convent in a car. Father asked a lady, Charu Ma, to accompany Mother for directions.

To start working in Moti Jheel, Mother had to find a nearby place to stay. Fortunately, an organization by the name of 'Sisters of the Poor' readily provided shelter for Mother. Sisters of this voluntary organization allowed Mother to stay there till she was able to make alternative arrangements for her stay.

The very next day, on December 21, 1948, Mother undertook house-to-house visits in the locality of Moti Jheel, to get acquainted with the people of the area. She apprised the residents there of her intention to start a school in the locality. She wanted to impart proper education and discipline to the children who otherwise wandered aimlessly in the streets.

One poor couple in Moti Jheel was the first to greet Mother in Moti Jheel. They promised to send their children to her school. Next day five children, all in dirty clothes appeared before Mother. As a first step, Mother made them wash their face and hands and also taught them how to greet others nicely.

Mother was now faced with the problem of finding some place to set up the school. She quickly devised an ingenious solution. There was a cluster of small hutments around some open ground in the settlement. There was also a large Neem tree on one side that provided some shade. Even though there was no roof, Mother considered this open space to be good enough. At least the large tree provided some shelter from heat. However, the ground was uneven and covered with dry and wild grass. Mother and children together set out to remove the grass and thereafter swept the place with a broom. Water was sprinkled so that the dust could settle down. The fresh wetting of the parched soil filled the air with its own sweet fragrance. That was the beginning of Mother's first school, with a wide-open sky as its roof. For strong willed and determined Mother, the sky-roof was good enough to begin her first venture.

In the school there was no chair or table or black board. There were no books, slates or pencils either. There was the backdrop of stark poverty of the area as compared to the abundant resources available at the Loreto Convent. There were no school uniforms for the children. Yet, five poor children filled with hope were expectantly looking at Mother. Using her robust common sense, Mother quickly invented an ingenious method to start the first lesson.

A dry twig was plucked from the Neem tree and its leaves were removed and carefully kept aside. To start with, Mother and the children all stood up and prayed together. Thereafter the children sat down on the ground. The school and the class had started! The first lesson commenced with Mother writing Bengali alphabets in the sand, using the twig as a makeshift pencil. Then Mother started pronouncing Bangla alphabets, with children repeating them in chorus. Neem leaves earlier removed from the twig and set aside were used to teach counting.

Mother's innovative and never-say-die approach had enabled the light of knowledge to penetrate and pierce the darkness of illiteracy! For the first time the banner of education had been hoisted in the shanties of Moti Jheel. Impoverished parents of poor children were delighted. The very next day one generous person gifted a decrepit chair and an old table that became the

first of the flood of donations, later received by Mother.

The aroma of a noble mission seemed to be in the air. Even the illiterate and poor persons could perceive that something good had happened. To see their children go to school was like a dream come true. A couple of days later, someone gifted a black board while another one brought some chalk. By now, other residents of the poor locality also started sending their children to school. The number of tiny tots coming to school gradually started increasing. A few ladies also volunteered to assist in teaching.

Most of the children were dirty and in soiled and tattered clothes. The nearby local pond was used for bathing and cleaning the children. Every Sunday the school was closed. On this day Mother herself bathed the little children. Soap cakes were awarded to children who behaved well in the school.

Mother faced another difficulty with these children. These children were in the habit of using vulgar and uncivilized words and foul language. She had to get them out of this habit. With immense patience, Mother gradually improved their conversational language. If any child uttered foul words Mother admonished him, saying, "You must speak better and beautiful language-otherwise you will not be allowed to attend the class from tomorrow." But it was a threat that Mother never meant to nor actually implemented. She never prevented any child from attending the class. Often illiterate parents of the children also sat in the class with their wards and Mother welcomed them too.

Impressed by her work and dedication, in the first month itself the Priest of Park Circus extended monetary help of a hundred rupees to expand her school activities. In 1948, this amount of one hundred rupees was a princely sum equivalent to thousands of rupees today. Acting quickly, Mother put the money to good use by hiring two rooms, each at Rs. 5 per month. One of the rooms was used for the school while a dispensary was set up in the other. Her initiative was already bearing fruit.

People were highly appreciative of Mother's efforts. However, they were also skeptical of how long this effort by a lone nun, without any kind of resources at her command would last. They however hoped for the best.

At that time nobody could have imagined that a lone nun's small beginning of a school under an open sky in Moti Jheel will ultimately grow into an institution straddling the whole world. Or that the diminutive woman teaching alphabets to children by drawing them on the sand with a twig of a Neem tree would one day hold aloft the Nobel Prize in her hands!

## AN EARTHEN HAT

**O**n 28 February 1949 Mother came to stay at the house of Michael Gomez at 14 Creek Lane in Kolkata. In a room on the third floor, Mother kept her wooden box and a small statuette of Mother Mary. She had neither money nor anything to eat. She had no security. There was stark loneliness. Her only strength was a powerful urge and zeal to embrace and serve the poor.

The family of Michael Gomez lived at the lower floor. This family welcomed Mother and provided her with all the help. Whenever necessary, they even shared meals with her.

Until this time Mother was the lone flag bearer of the 'Missionaries of Charity' and no one else had joined it. Mother had herself framed some rules for this institution. Even today these rules exist in the same form. From the very beginning, Mother strictly followed the rules. One of these rules was the 'Rule of Two' i.e., that no sister would ever go out alone. In those early days, Mother was alone and as such would often request Mrs. Gomez or one of her daughters to accompany her.

One day, Mother accompanied by Mabel, the younger daughter of Gomez went to Moti Jheel. Usually Mother would go in the morning and return by midday. That day she did not come back till after 2 in the afternoon. It was raining very heavily. Gomez's family was worried.

After a while, Mother and Mabel returned in a totally disheveled condition. Their feet were covered with mud and they had been drenched and soaked to the skin by rain. Michael was alarmed at this sight. He politely admonished her, "Mother, you should not have come in such heavy rain. You should have found shelter somewhere. I am afraid that both of you may fall sick."

Mother first apologized to Gomez for Mabel getting drenched

because of her. Thereafter, she explained, "I had been to the Moti Jheel locality today. Our getting drenched in the rain is nothing in comparison with the scene I saw there. It is a heart rending scene." Mother then began narrating the entire incident.

"In the Moti Jheel locality it was raining so heavily that it appeared as if the skies would burst. We saw a woman standing in knee-deep water in a hut without any roof. In the torrential rain, the woman had her infant child in her arms. The weather had become chilly because of windy conditions. The child in tattered clothes was crying and having very high fever.

The woman had a small half broken earthen pitcher in her hand. She was desperately trying to use the pitcher like a hat as a protective cover over the head of the child. She was also unsuccessfully trying to somehow cover herself with the remnants of her worn out saree. Both the child and the woman were shivering but she had nothing else to cover herself or the child. The earthen pitcher 'hat' could provide little protection to the child from the rain. All that the poor woman could do with the pitcher was to prevent the rain showers falling directly on the head of the child. The hapless woman had no other means or option.

The only fault of that woman in that roofless hut was that she had not been able to pay the preceding two months' rent to the landlord. For this default of a meager total sum of eight rupees towards the rent for two months, the owner of the hut had initially threatened to demolish her hut. Since she was still in no position to pay the rent, the merciless landlord had the roof of the hut removed. The woman was devastated. The woman's paltry possession of a small quantity of rice in a broken canister too had become wet with rain and the seeping floodwater. It was no longer edible. The earthen hearth and her few ragged clothes were also floating in water.

Despite this hardship, the woman did not want to leave the hut. She feared that she might forfeit, forever, her right to that dwelling place if she were to leave the place. She hoped against hope that she would somehow be able to regain the roof after clearing the arrears."

Narrating this touching incident Mother appealed to Michael,

"We must do something. An innocent child cannot be allowed to die for want of a paltry sum of eight rupees." Mother quickly changed her clothes and dumped into her shoulder bag the few eatables available in the house. With the bag slung on her shoulder, she said: "Come on Michael, God would definitely help."

With Mother's timely effort the eight rupees were soon arranged. A helpless woman in distress got the roof back on her hut and head.

In those initial days of struggle, this incident completely jolted Mother. But this also strengthened her steely resolve to do something for the poor. Her self-confidence got a boost. Her determination not to leave the poor, destitute and homeless to die on the roadside became stronger.

## HANKY ON THE NOSE

**I**t was the year 1952. Mother knocked at the doors of the local municipality after all her other efforts to get any place for the dying and destitute had failed. Dr. Ahmed of the municipality was a very kind officer. Mother told him, "There are a large number of terminally ill and dying people writhing and groaning in pain in the parks, on the roadside and on the footpaths. Staff in the hospital is reluctant to admit them. Where we should take them?"

Dr. Ahmed: "What do you expect of us?"

Mother Teresa: "I require only a place. Rest I would manage."

Dr. Ahmed: "What are the resources available with you?"

Mother stretched out both her arms and said, "Service and love."

With his long experience of service, Dr. Ahmed could gauge that this woman was sincere and serious. What the frail looking and diminutive woman had said had an unmistakable blend of honesty and strong determination. Dr. Ahmed was himself troubled by the problem of dead bodies lying on the roadside. Suddenly a thought flashed in his mind. He was getting hundreds of complaints about the misuse of an important place.

This place was a Dharamshala<sup>5</sup> near the famous Kalighat Temple of Calcutta. Some rich businessman had constructed two big halls for overnight stay of pilgrims. These halls had for long time served the needs of the pilgrims but lately some unsocial and undesirable persons having nothing to do with pilgrimage to the temple had made these rooms their den.

Dr. Ahmed saw an opportunity to kill two birds with one stone. He thought to himself that if permission was given to Mother

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<sup>5</sup> These are lodging places with nominal or no charge.

to use these halls, he would have already obliged her and in addition, the unsocial characters would also be automatically driven away. He lost no time and gave her permission to use the two halls. Mother Teresa was delighted. She named this place as 'Nirmal Hridaya'<sup>6</sup>. She could already visualize that in these halls close to ninety sick persons could easily be accommodated and looked after.

After a few days some local people, especially the Pandits of the temple started complaining. Their charge was that here in the garb of service, Mother was converting Hindus. It was alleged that she was converting the dying destitutes to Christianity and then burying them according to Christian rites.

As time passed, the complainants became more vociferous. Complaints soon reached Dr. Ahmed too and he decided to make a surprise inspection. The Police Commissioner and Dr. Ahmed accompanied by the Head Pandit visited 'Nirmal Hriday' to make an on-the-site investigation and assessment of the situation. Seeing vehicles of Police and other officers, a large crowd of onlookers gathered. The Pandit and some pilgrims, along with some of the gathered crowd started shouting slogans against Mother and wanted the place to be restored as a Dharamshala.

The Pandit and the Police Commissioner went inside. Mother was herself nursing a patient. The patient had festering wounds and his flesh had peeled off from many parts of his body. Mother was patiently removing maggots with an instrument soaked in tincture. The patient was groaning in pain. The room was stinking with an unbearable stench. In this environment, the Pandit could not help covering his nose with a handkerchief. Mother Teresa was so deeply engrossed in tenderly nursing the patient that she did not even notice the Police Commissioner and the party's arrival or their presence.

The Police Commissioner, Dr. Ahmed and others heard Mother speaking softly to the patient, "You pray according to your religion. I will pray according to what I know. Let us pray together. God would like it." And both started praying.

<sup>6</sup> In Hindi, means 'pure heart'.

In the meantime some more people came into the room. They were all overwhelmed by the poignancy of what they saw. The Police Commissioner turned towards the Pandit and firmly told him, "I shall return this place to you the day you are able to enter these rooms without covering your nose with a handkerchief." Saying this, the Police Commissioner turned to go out of room. The Pandit totally bewildered and speechless was walking behind him with his head bowed down. All his objections had evaporated.

The Police Commissioner whispered to Dr. Ahmed, "Come Doctor, let us try to ensure that this goddess stays here."

## MOTHER ON DHARNA

**I**t was rainy season. These were torrential monsoon rains in Kolkata. In the morning Mother and Sister Agnes noticed something looking like a bundle of rags lying on the footpath. Mother had a closer look and discovered that it was a woman in an unconscious state. She was still breathing.

The nearest hospital was the Campbell Hospital (now Neelratan Government Hospital). Mother and Sister hired a rickshaw and somehow took the unconscious woman to the hospital. The hospital staff informed them that no bed was available and there was no place to accommodate any more patients there.

Mother pleaded with them that just as some others had been accommodated on the floor, this sick woman could also be accommodated there. When hospital staff still did not relent, Mother offered, "I shall keep her in my lap but please do give her treatment."

Doctors reasoned, "Mother! There is no space even to sit. As far as treatment is concerned, she cannot be saved. There is no possible treatment for her." What he perhaps left unsaid and had in his mind was that hospitals naturally prefer to give beds to patients whom they could save rather than to those who had no hope of survival!

Mother humbly persisted: "Doctor you tell me. Where should I take this sick unfortunate woman?" The heartless doctor replied, "Mother, please leave her at the same place from where you picked her up. After she is dead, the Municipal van would take the dead body away." Aghast at this callous attitude, Mother exclaimed, "Doctor she is still alive!"

Mother's heart wept. But she did not give up. She sat down on the floor with that sick woman in her arms. She kept on

praying. Hours passed by. Mother did not flinch from her place. She just sat there. Officers of the hospital paid no more attention. Mother's resolve became even more intense.

Hours rolled by. Mother continued sitting there, quietly, without taking any food or water. She remained silent and did not utter a word for five hours. She was sitting there with a resolve not to move from there. This was Mother on 'Dharna', literally meaning a non-violent sit-down protest.

It was almost late evening. It was time for the duty officer to leave. When that doctor came out, he found the nun still sitting there. This time Mother did not speak. She only looked helplessly at the doctor, as if once again beseeching him to treat the hapless sick woman.

The doctor paused. There was possibly a prick of conscience. He got a mattress placed on the floor. Treatment also commenced. But the needle of the syringe was unable to pierce the atrophied flesh of the woman to inject the medicine inside. The sick woman took barely two sips of water. Her condition was deteriorating. After a few hours, she died a peaceful death in the arms of the Mother and in an environment of love and prayer to god. Mother exclaimed, "She at least died a beautiful death!"

Agony and suffering of such dying, abandoned and uncared for human beings always distressed Mother. When she hired two rooms in the Moti Jheel at a monthly rent of rupees five each, one of the small rooms was used as Mother's school while the other was set apart for housing the sick and dying she picked from the parks, streets and sidewalks. The room was very small and at a time no more than four or five persons could be accommodated.

One day one critically ill person died at night. The other four patients were mortally scared to spend the whole night with a dead body in their midst. In the middle of the night they surreptitiously fled, without Mother getting any inkling of it. Mother then realized that it was neither correct nor possible to keep a dead body among living residents. She had to find a suitable place. Her search for a suitable place intensified.

In the meantime Mother spotted another very sick woman lying under a tree. She was hardly 30-35 years of age but was very

weak and unconscious. Ants and rats had nibbled at one half of her face. Her face looked ghastly even though she was still alive.

It was a coincidence that the nearest hospital was once again the Neelratan Government Hospital. But this time the doctors did not turn her away- they had not forgotten Mother's determination, commitment and compassion. The staff merely smiled and the patient was promptly taken in for treatment. The woman regained her health following treatment and care for a few weeks. For years, this woman assisted Mother in her work. Having herself suffered pain she knew what pain was or how badly it hurts. She could fully empathize and relate to the sick and lonely persons and earn their confidence.

Mother redoubled her efforts to find a suitable place for such unwanted, abandoned and distressed persons. Countless sick, aged and helpless persons die on the city's streets. The Municipal vans take them away. All that is recorded in the registers is this!

|                      |   |          |
|----------------------|---|----------|
| Name of the dead     | - | Unknown! |
| Age of the dead      | - | Unknown! |
| Religion of the dead | - | Unknown! |
| Address of the dead  | - | Unknown! |

## **GANDHIJI PREM NIWAS**

**T**his event took place in the year 1950. On a Sunday evening a woman named Janaki came to Mother's Home. Her family had abandoned her there. She was from an affluent family, wearing gold and diamond studded jewellery. For sometime now, she was afflicted with leprosy. Out of a mistaken fear of her communicating the disease to other members of the family as well as hatred for her dappled and mutilated body, the family shamelessly decided to abandon her at Mother's Home. Out of ignorance, there is a social stigma attached to the disease, even though it is easily treated. The family had brought her to Mother's Home without disclosing to her the real purpose of the visit.

In those days, in Kolkata a large number of lepers would be found lying on the footpaths by the roadside. Barrackpore, Sealdah and Garihat areas, all had them. The largest number was at Titagarh on the banks of the Hoogli river.

Until that time, the Missionaries of Charity was not equipped to handle or keep leprosy patients. That lady had never stepped out of her home. Finding herself in the alien surroundings of the Mother's home, she started weeping bitterly. Where to keep her was Mother's worry. It was not advisable to keep her for long with the non-leprosy patients.

Taking stock of the entire situation Mother first started a mobile leprosy clinic. Later with the donation of a piece of land by the Titagarh Municipality, Mother made some simple arrangements at Titagarh for lodging male leprosy patients. But there was no place for Sisters to stay there. As such, Mother would visit them with two or three Sisters once every week. She would examine the patients and also dress their wounds. They would also be given appropriate medicines after which Mother and Sisters would return to Kolkata.

Soon a bamboo hut with tiled roof was erected in the adjacent area. Janaki and other leprosy-afflicted women were accommodated there. Here again Janaki was insistent on going back to her home and family. She had still not forgotten the comforts of her own home.

One day, crying copiously Janaki revealed, "I have three sons. One is a Brigadier in the Army and the second one is a doctor. The third one is a lawyer with a handsome practice. My late husband had also left behind a big mansion and plenty of cash. Please take me to my home." Little did the poor lady know that none other than her own well-to-do sons had abandoned her in that place.

Finally, she had to be told that her family members did not want her to go back amongst them. She was shocked, as if struck by lightning. She was totally shattered and dumbfounded to learn this cruel truth. After this revelation she would mostly have a dazed and vacant look, blankly staring in space.

Slowly, selfless service and care in Mother's Home won her over. It was five long years before she came to terms with reality and started mixing with other inmates. She was now beginning to feel at home in that environment. Mother's Home had now become her 'home' too.

The number of patients in the Home soon shot up to hundreds, and then to thousands. Ultimately, a special hospital for leprosy patients was established there. Residential arrangements were also made for Sisters to stay there.

All requirements of medicines, food and clothes of the leprosy patients were met by the Home. Mother also made efforts to impart training in handloom weaving to those patients who had recovered. Productive working restored their self-respect and also yielded handsome income amounting to thousands of rupees every month. The profits were distributed amongst the workers themselves. The thrill of having their own income spurred them to work even more.

But all this was also accompanied by many new problems. The needs of the patients were proliferating and so were their

demands. They became more demanding asking for several other items in addition to medicines, food and clothes. They would often protest and quarrel when these demands were not met.

One day the inmates ganged up and revolted against the Sisters. Slogans were shouted against Mother and Sisters. One of the young men climbed on the roof-top and from his perch tried to rouse other inmates against the Mother and Sisters. A little later they got together to 'Gherao'<sup>7</sup> the Sisters.

The Director of the Home, Kristo Das, immediately sent a message to Mother. On arrival, Mother was deeply distressed to see the developments. Without speaking a word she first went into the small church inside the Home and offered prayers. When she came out, she firmly asserted, "Those of you who have any objections to abiding by the rules of the Home can leave it right away. Any form of misbehaviour would not be tolerated."

She turned back and sat down in the small office of the Home. She confabulated with Sisters and the Director. The day went by but no one volunteered to leave the Home.

Mother stayed over for the night. Next day, even kind-hearted Mother had to take a tough posture. She called all the leprosy patients outside the Home. She politely asked them to reveal the names of the mischief-makers. She made it clear that until the culprits were identified and they apologized, the work of the Home would remain suspended. She turned back and sat down with Sisters to offer prayers.

For the inmates of the Home the stern stance of the usually mild-mannered Mother was entirely unprecedented and unexpected. And it had the desired impact. By dusk, three persons who were the ringleaders came to the Mother and said, "Mother! Please forgive us. In future, we will never repeat this mistake. No one else can render the yeoman service that you are providing here."

All three of them showed sincere remorse and started crying unashamedly. Kind and large-hearted Mother forgave them. She

<sup>7</sup> It literally means to surround but is referred colloquially to the practice used by militant labour as a coercive weapon of surrounding and closing all access to Managements and intimidating them into submission on their demands.

also blessed them by placing her hand affectionately on their heads. Thereafter, Mother assigned to the erstwhile mischief-makers themselves the special responsibility to maintain, in future, the order and discipline in the Home.

Mother named the Titagarh Leprosy Home 'Gandhiji Prem Niwas'. During her lifetime, Mother had never met Gandhiji. Yet, she was deeply influenced by his work. Gandhiji was the first to give a nation-wide call for upliftment and service of the downtrodden, the Harijans (untouchables) and the leprosy patients and Mother too had taken up that very cause as it had struck a sensitive chord in her heart.

## MYSTERY OF THE DARK ROOMS

‘The Statesman’, a well-respected English daily newspaper from Kolkata had for the first time carried a well-documented article about the activities of Mother for the poorest of the poor. Before that, people outside Kolkata knew very little about Mother’s humanitarian work. The services rendered by Mother were again highlighted in an article in the Illustrated Weekly of India, a large circulation national English weekly. Later, Amrit Bazar Patrika, another English daily of Kolkata too eulogized Mother’s spirit of service. From time to time, more articles about Mother’s work were carried by other national and regional publications and her humanitarian activities became very well known in the country.

Gradually, her fame and mission spread beyond the shores of India as well. The British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) of London also learnt of Mother’s fame for her yeoman humanitarian services. It soon commissioned Malcolm Muggeridge to produce a documentary on Mother Teresa. When BBC sought her permission, Mother flatly refused. She politely explained that she was doing the work for God and did not want any publicity for it.

Muggeridge was deeply disappointed. Senior officers from the BBC approached the Archbishop of the Church of Westminster in London to use his good offices to persuade Mother. The Archbishop carefully listened to them. He then pleaded with Mother on their behalf, arguing that a documentary in BBC with its world-wide reach would carry her message far and wide and that people in other countries would better know what ‘Missionaries of Charity’ was doing in India. Despite her reservations, Mother reluctantly agreed. Once Mother’s permission was obtained, Malcolm Muggeridge promptly set off for India to commence the production of the documentary. It aimed to present glimpses of the work of Missionaries of Charity to make it better known throughout the world.

Mother's Homes are situated in different states of India. Muggeridge toured many such Homes and finally came to Kolkata. Mother asked him to visit Kalighat. The famous Kali Temple and Mother's first Home in Kolkata - 'Nirmal Hriday' - are both in Kalighat area. 'Nirmal Hriday' is the origin of Missionaries of Charity and had always remained Mother's first love. Muggeridge decided to take his main shots at 'Nirmal Hriday'.

When shooting started, the cameramen found that many inside rooms of Nirmal Hriday were dark and the natural light was inadequate for photography. These rooms were home to many aged, sick and disabled persons. Some of the rooms also had orphan children, who had found their smiles again. These rooms were clearly very important from the point of view of focusing on Mother's work. In those days there were very few items of equipment for artificial lighting. Time was also limited. Reluctantly, the team had to skip the dark rooms and proceeded to shoot in the outer rooms of Nirmal Hriday that had better natural light. After completing the shooting in the outer rooms, the team found that it was still left with some stock of unused film.

The cameraman informed Muggeridge that he still had some unused film and he could try filming in the inside rooms which had earlier been skipped because of inadequate light. The team knew the futility of the exercise but decided that as some unused film was in any case available, nothing would be lost in taking shots in the inside rooms as well and then hope for the best.

Muggeridge returned with his crew to London. He still lamented the fact that many important rooms did not have adequate light and that no clear or bright pictures could be expected from those rooms. He could not come to terms with the fact that shots of many such important rooms would be missing in the film. His innermost feeling was as if the work was incomplete had not been satisfactorily completed.

Muggeridge was also aware of the great difficulty with which Mother's permission for the making of his documentary had been secured. Mother was averse to publicity for her work and there was little likelihood of any second permission, for shooting again.

In London, the film was processed. When the prints came,

Muggeridge, his cameramen and the crewmembers were in for a big and pleasant surprise. Mysteriously, in the entire film, the pictures of those ill-lit rooms were the clearest, brightest and most beautiful! Other pictures shot in the better-lit rooms were not so clear. No one was able to fathom the mystery.

Sometime later, this incident was narrated to Mother Teresa. She just smiled but refused to comment. When pressed, she said, "I remember this incident. This really did happen. But there is nothing to be surprised about. This is the light of god. God himself is divine light. His light is there every moment and everywhere. In some specific instances we feel his light. The feeling of god's light would have the same intensity as our inner feeling for service and love. I have experienced many such incidents. Similarly, at any time and whenever I need it, I get help from god, according to my requirement."

Muggeridge was a staunch materialist. He was agnostic and had no faith in god. He was irreverential and ruthless to many learned religious scholars while interviewing them for B.B.C. television. But after coming into contact with Mother Teresa he became a believer. He remained actively involved in the activities of Mother until his death. He wrote a book on Mother Teresa titled 'Something Beautiful for God.' In the book Muggeridge has very lucidly described this interesting and extraordinary but real incident.

The documentary film made by Muggeridge was screened at the 40th session of U.N. General Assembly. The then U.N. Secretary General Javier Perez de Cueller after seeing the film commented, "She is the most powerful woman of the world."

Responding quickly, Mother exhorted the assembled dignitaries, "Dear friends! This organization was established to bring peace in the world. But peace is nowhere in the world. Therefore let us pray to the only one who can bestow peace on us." The entire audience present there prayed with Mother. "Oh Lord! Make us all instruments of your peace."

The usually modest Mother later made this triumphant comment, "I drew them all to prayer at a place where they had never prayed before."

## RETURN OF A GOLD MEDAL

Mother was very much attached to her companion nuns. She was always mindful of the fact that they had joined Missionaries of Charity after renouncing all that they had of this material world. These nuns had cut-off their ties with their parents, brothers and sisters, relations, friends etc. Now, only Mother Teresa was their mother and the world of poor was their extended family.

Mother was keen that her nuns should fully develop their natural capabilities. She encouraged many bright and gifted nuns to pursue higher studies. Her special emphasis was on subjects such as pharmacology, first aid, handicrafts, foreign languages etc., which could be useful in the work of Missionaries of Charity.

Mother had noticed that sister Andria was intelligent and had great potential. She was from Germany. She was exceptionally pretty with blue eyes and a very fair complexion. She had joined Mother in those early days when she was still living on the third floor at 14-Creek Lane. She was always a topper until her graduation. In her Bachelor of Science (B.Sc.) examination she had been awarded a gold medal.

Because of her excellent academic record, Sister Andria got admission for the M.B.B.S. course at the famous Neelratan Sarkar Medical College in Kolkata. Mother allowed her to take up the course and become a doctor. Andria was very happy. She studied very hard and concurrently worked with renewed vigour in the service of poor in Mother's Homes.

When the result of her final M.B.B.S. examination was declared, sister Andria had topped and was awarded a Gold Medal. At that time Mother was away from Kolkata. Therefore Sister Superior sent Sister Andria to the university convocation to receive her degree and the Gold Medal. When Sister received the Gold Medal there were feelings of joy and amazement in the university

campus specially because Sister Andria had studied while continuing her participation in the humanitarian activities at Mother's Homes. Sister Andria's joy knew no bounds. She was impatient to break this news to Mother.

Mother was back in Kolkata a couple of days later. Sister Andria jubilantly showed the medal to the Mother. Mother took the medal in her hands and carefully examined it thoroughly. She then congratulated Sister Andria and thereafter placed the Medal on the table, instead of giving it back to Sister.

Very serenely she asked sister, "You do not have to take up a job. You are not likely to start your own clinic or practice. You are not going to put a signboard 'Sister Andria, M.B.B.S., Gold Medalist.' Then, what would you do with this Gold Medal? Have you given any thought to this?" Andria could not guess what was in Mother's mind.

Sister: "No Mother, I have not given any thought to these aspects."

Mother: "Sister, you have to think about it."

Sister: "As you say Mother."

Mother continued, "You studied hard for the examination. You acquired knowledge very well. You will now have the advantage of this knowledge in the service of the sick and dying. But for that purpose, this Gold Medal is of no additional advantage." And then came the shock. Mother said in a low voice, "You should return this Gold Medal. Go and tell the functionary of the university that this medal is of no use to me and that it may as well be awarded to the next candidate. For him this medal is likely to be extremely valuable. May be it will brighten his future."

Momentarily, Sister Andria was shocked and non-plussed. She hesitated. For a brief moment she doubted the wisdom of Mother's decision and could only exclaim, "Mother!"

Mother Teresa saw the shock and disappointment on her face and affectionately explained, "Sister, in our work, love is required for the service of the poor and the unwanted, for the sick and for the dying. Your mission is to work amongst those poor and

illiterate people and this Gold Medal is of no value there."

This set Sister Andria seriously thinking. She was quick to understand the import and significance of Mother's words.

She happily went to the university and returned the Gold Medal to the Vice-Chancellor. He was amazed at this unusual gesture. This had never happened before. Return of a prestigious university Gold Medal was an unusual event. The Vice-Chancellor and other officers were reluctant to concede to this unusual request and agreed to accept the return of the Gold Medal only after Sister Andria explained her reasons.

That Gold Medal was thereafter awarded to the student who secured the second rank in the same examination. That student was very poor. His parents had paid his fees after selling their house and jewellery. He was overjoyed at the turn of events and the unexpected receipt of the medal. He was delighted to prominently display the framed medal on the wall of his clinic.

That doctor had sincere respect for Sister Andria and Mother Teresa for their self-lessness and high thinking. When he started his practice, as a mark of his respect for her he placed his first month's earnings at the feet of Mother. For the next two years he would spend his own money to regularly bring a whole lot of medicines to Mother. Later when he set up his clinic in a posher area of Kolkata, he again prominently displayed this medal as a wall hanging, alongside a framed picture of Mother Teresa.

Many years later Mother Teresa with Sister Andria went to that doctor's clinic to get medicines. They were both delighted to see the medal still adorning the clinic wall alongside Mother's picture.

As time passed, a series of Mother's Homes came to be established in many countries outside India. When a new Home was being set up in New York City in U.S.A., Mother selected Sister Andria to assume the responsibility of running that Home. For many years, Doctor Sister Andria served a large number of poor living in that rich city of an affluent nation.

## AUCTION OF THE GIFTS

Pope Paul was accorded a grand welcome when he came on a visit to the U.S.A. in 1964. The Ford motor car company offered the Platest model of one of its luxury 'Lincoln' car, for the Pope's use during his tour of America. The Pope's tour of America was completed in comfort in this majestic car. After his USA tour, the Pope was scheduled to visit India. When he left USA, the Ford motor car company gifted the car to the Pope.

From USA, the Pope came straight to India. Another aircraft brought the car also to India. The Pope used this luxury car during his travel in India. But the real reason why the Pope brought the car to India soon became known. When he was leaving India, the Pope gifted the expensive car to Mother Teresa.

Mother always lived a life of simplicity and austerity. Many years earlier in 1962, when Mother was to be decorated with 'Padma Shri', the Government of India sent a big limousine to bring her to the Rashtrapati Bhawan (the President's House) in ceremonial style. Mother did not find this ceremonial fanfare compatible with her work among the poorest of the poor. She politely declined to go to in that big car and instead traveled in an ordinary van. She also asked the army escort vehicles to go back.

Mother Teresa arrived at Rashtrapati Bhawan in one of the ambulance vans of her Home. The words 'Missionaries of Charity' were boldly inscribed on both sides of the van. In the midst of expensive and luxurious cars, Mother's modest ambulance-cum-van stood out as the lone but conspicuous voice of the poor and the deprived.

There was no way that Mother could refuse the gift from the Pope. She very well knew that she and her Homes for the poor had no use for that symbol of pomp and luxury but out of her intense regard for the Pope, she reluctantly accepted the car. Mother was now in a dilemma as to how to utilize this car.

However, Mother quickly devised a very practical and ingenious solution to the problem. She decided to sell the car in an open lottery. Her reasoning was simple. Since she got it as a gift, she had every right to do what she liked with it - keep it, use it or dispose it.

In 1964, the cost of this car was one lakh rupees. She got 5000 hundred-rupee lottery tickets printed.

The sale of lottery tickets and organization of a lottery for the car fetched five lakh rupees. It was a princely sum equivalent in purchasing value of about fifty to seventy lakh rupees of today. Mother was delighted at this windfall. She earmarked the entire amount for the Shanti Nagar Lepers Rehabilitation Scheme in Kolkata. With this investment, hundreds of additional leprosy patients got shelter and employment. Additional resources also became available for the medicines and nursing of leprosy patients.

Mother similarly utilized innumerable other gifts that she received in India and abroad. Often she would sell even the plaques and shields received as token of appreciation of her humanitarian work. It was her abiding affection for the poor and the destitute and her determination to use every bit of available resource that prompted her to follow this path without ever being apologetic about it.

The then Prime Minister of India, Shri P.V. Narsimha Rao organized a function in New Delhi to honour Mother Teresa. Mother had to leave the function in a hurry to catch a flight for Kolkata. In that rush she left behind the gift presented to her by the Prime Minister. She reached Kolkata without the gift. The organizers wanted to send the gift to Kolkata and contacted her there but Mother stopped them from sending it to Kolkata. Instead, she suggested, "Please auction this gift. The auction is likely to fetch at least ten thousand rupees. This amount would come in handy for me and could be utilized for arranging medicines for leprosy patients of Titagarh." And to make sure that they did so, Mother did not forget to add, "I hope the organizers would have no objection to this proposal." Mother did not ever feel ashamed to pursue anything that helped her in fulfilling her mission of service to the poorest of the poor.

## HALF A BREAD

Mother Teresa's Home in the beautiful Pink city of Jaipur is situated on the Vardhman street. It houses the aged, disabled and sick persons. Few young boys are also amongst them. They all suffer from one or another chronic disease. That day there was great commotion in the Home. Mother had come. A Jain gentleman had made a handsome donation for adding another floor to the Home in memory of his late father. This would add about fifty additional beds. It meant extra accommodation that would bring relief to fifty more poor sick, aged and the dying. All of them will get care and treatment. Some of them would regain health. Others suffering from terminal sicknesses would die peaceful deaths, enveloped in love and comfort.

There was a stream of people from all strata of the society. The rich, the poor, the journalists, all came to witness the inauguration and to have a glimpse of Mother, and if lucky, possibly meet Mother. The newly constructed first floor was inaugurated. Bishops offered prayers. Pandits lighted lamps and recited mantras. Food and clothes were distributed. The ceremony came to a close by about 5 p.m. People had started leaving. I was also planning to return but stayed a little longer. I could not overcome the temptation to be close to Mother when the crowds had thinned. Mother was also almost ready to leave as it was getting close to her prayer time. Just then Mother saw a ten-year old girl who was crawling. Mother went to her. A few other people and I followed Mother. The girl had perhaps been disabled by polio.

Mother: "What happened to your legs?"

Girl: "I do not know."

Mother: "What is your name?"

Girl: "Rarnoori."

Mother: "Where are your mother and father?"

Ramoori: "Four-five years ago they left me outside the temple and have not come back ever since."

Mother: "Where are your brothers and sisters?"

Ramoori: "I have two brothers and a sister. My parents took them along. They were grown up and not lame and disabled like me." Saying this she lifted her two paralysed legs with her two hands upto about a feet in the air, and then dropped them. Her legs fell down on the ground like lifeless objects.

Mother: "Ramoori, will you eat something?"

Ramoori: "Yes, I am hungry" she said, with her hands pointing to her stomach.

Mother: "For how long have you not eaten anything?"

Ramoori: "Since morning. I did get some chapatis, bread, money and clothes in alms. But I had to give all that to Dada Bhai. Whatever I get now would be mine." There was glimmer of hope in her eyes.

Mother: "Who is this Dada Bhai?"

Ramoori's eyes widened in astonishment. She said, "Oh! You do not know Dada Bhai. He protects us from the police and the goondas. In return we give him most of our earnings."

Mother smiled and said, "You earn for him!" Ramoori laughed and said, "This is our livelihood. Begging is our job."

Mother gave her four bread pieces with jam spread on them. Ramoori started eating but stealthily she was stuffing away half of each bread piece in her pocket.

Mother asked her, "My dear girl! You said you are very hungry. Aren't you? Then why have you quietly kept some bread pieces in your pocket?"

Ramoori replied, "I will eat them at night. I cannot sleep while I am hungry." Pointing towards the sky, she continued, "It is likely that it may rain heavily. At that time everybody goes inside

his house and no one is on the streets to give alms. I have no chance of getting any alms when it is raining."

Mother: "Come close to me." Mother gave her a hug and then took her inside the Home and asked one of the Sisters to provide her food and some clothes.

Mother turned to me and said, "You may be able to provide her with crutches. That would greatly help her. Later, could she be fitted with calipers?"

I looked at Ramoori. She was elated to see so much of food before her. Her face glowed with contentment. She was eating slowly. Now she did not feel any need to hide the food. There was no rush. Experience of begging from countless persons had taught her to distinguish, by mere face reading, between different people. At this place her sixth sense told her that she was safe where nobody would snatch her plate of food.

Mother affectionately patted Ramoori and told her, "Whenever you are hungry, you can come here." Then Mother turned and took a few quick steps to go to the prayer room.

I had a long chat with Ramoori. I asked her, "Will you look after small kids in the children's Home? Will you play with them? You do not have to beg. Stay here and eat to your satisfaction."

"If Dada Bhai comes to take me back?"

"We will take care of that." I assured her.

She was surprised. Her face reflected a mixture of both happiness and fear. Was it real? Possibly, she was still debating in her little mind if I really meant what I said.

## POVERTY OF THE RICH

**I**t happened nearly twenty five years ago. One Shri Chatterji always used to assist Mother Teresa in her activities at 'Nirmal Hridaya' in Kolkata. He was from a well-to-do family. He devoted a lot of time at Mother's Home. He took keen interest in teaching orphan children, solving their problems and playing with them. As far as possible, he extended financial assistance also.

Once, Milind, Shri Chatterji's grand son fell seriously ill. He needed an immediate operation. Shri Chatterji was keen to get the operation done by one of the top-most doctors of Kolkata. It was heavy on the purse but the amount needed for the operation was arranged, and a date for the operation was also fixed.

One problem still remained to be resolved. Shri Chatterji went to Mother's Home as usual. However, he was unusually quiet. He did not talk to anyone. That day he did not also play with the children. Observing his unusual silence, Mother enquired, "Chatterji Babu! Is there any problem? You seem to be deeply pensive and worried today."

Shri Chatterji could not say anything. He was in tears. Feeling somewhat reassured by Mother's affectionate touch, Shri Chatterji explained, "Mother! I am deeply upset. My eleven-year-old grandson, Milind, is to be operated upon in two days time. Every thing else is arranged but there is still one stumbling block. One critical medicine required to be given for one week after the operation is not available anywhere in India. I have tried in the whole of Kolkata. I have checked with my friends and relatives in Mumbai and Delhi as well. I am told that this crucial drug is available only in foreign countries. If it has to come from abroad, it would take a long time but the operation is to be performed immediately. I am in a fix. I do not know what to do. I am prepared to pay any price for this special drug."

Mother understood Shri Chatterji's predicament. She said, "Yesterday a consignment of vital imported medicines has arrived from France. There are about one hundred cartons stored outside, in the hall. May be, you will find the medicine you need in that lot."

A search for the medicine was immediately undertaken in those cartons. The search was made easier as the exterior of each carton indicated the name of the medicines inside, in French as well as in English.

The search lasted for about an hour and successful. One carton did have the medicine required by Milind. Shri Chatterji wept with joy. He rushed to Mother with the carton in his hand. In a voice choked with emotion he said, "Mother! This is the medicine I was looking for. I am deeply grateful to you."

Feeling overwhelmed with joy and also deeply indebted, Shri Chatterji offered to pay the price of the medicine to the Home.

Mother told Shri Chatterji very politely, "Chatterji Babu! We are not in the business of selling medicines. These medicines have come for the poor as gifts from different countries."

"But Mother! I am not poor" Shri Chatterji said. He added, "I am in a position to pay for the medicine for my grandson, howsoever costly it may be."

Mother smiled, looked straight into the tearful eyes of Shri Chatterji and said, "You are mistaken. You are not well-to-do. At this moment, you are the poorest man in the world. You had been roaming the whole of Kolkata with your purse full of money, but could not get the medicine. You could not get the medicine even when you tried throughout the entire country. For want of this critical medicine you were a helpless and a dejected person. You were poorer than the poorest because your money was of no avail to you. When the life of your grand son Milind was at risk your wealth could not help you. Only the medicine meant for the poor has come to your rescue. You rush to the hospital and get your grand son operated upon. God has sent this medicine for this child and he will also cure him."

Shri Chatterji rushed to the hospital where his grand son was

admitted. The operation was successful and with the availability of the appropriate medicine, he was soon on way to recovery. The day Milind was discharged from the hospital, Chatterji Babu took him straight to Mother. She affectionately blessed him. Chatterji Babu was overwhelmed with joy beyond words.

## THE SULLIED HANDS OF SENATOR KENNEDY

If you are at Dum Dum Airport in Kolkata, you will find right opposite Mother's 'Nirmal Kennedy Centre' Home. This incident took place at this location in 1971. It was Bangladesh's war of independence and separation from Pakistan. Hundreds and thousands of people were fleeing from East Pakistan, as Bangladesh was then known. They were escaping the tyranny and atrocities of the Pakistani armed forces and had taken shelter in India. To accommodate these displaced persons, many refugee camps were set up on the outskirts of Kolkata. Nuns from the Missionaries of Charity had come forward to work in these camps.

Sanitary and living conditions in these camps were very poor. There was an outbreak of many diseases in these camps because of dirt, squalour and malnutrition. Finally, even the dreaded cholera broke out in the camps. There was filth all around and the air was filled with the stench of dysentery and vomit. People were crying and groaning. It was a heart rending scene.

During those days, US Senator Edward Kennedy (younger brother of former US President John Kennedy) came on a visit to India. He expressed a desire to see the refugee camps. The Government of India accordingly made arrangements for his visit to these camps.

A whole official entourage was with the Senator when he arrived at the camp. These included cameramen, reporters and officers. Many representatives of government and non-government organizations were present. A large number of curious onlookers also gathered around the Senator.

Kennedy was keen to see the things for himself. He requested the protocol official of the Government of India to let him go round the camps alone. He said, "I want to see everything by

myself but I am not able to do so while you are taking me around in a car. I want to walk down and meet people." Reluctantly, the officer agreed. Kennedy started walking alone.

It was a very touching scene. Many voluntary organizations were busy caring for the poor and displaced persons. Many of Mother's Sisters, clad in their trademark white sarees with blue border, were also engaged in service. All of a sudden Kennedy stopped at a spot where a Sister of the Missionaries of Charity was diligently and tenderly cleaning the body of a patient afflicted with cholera. The filth on the body of the patient had dirtied the hands and dress of the sister. Kennedy was emotionally overwhelmed when he saw this scene. He came closer and offered to shake Sister's hand. The Sister hesitated. She then gathered enough courage and withdrew her hands saying, "Please excuse me. My hands are very dirty."

In an highly emotional gesture, the Senator stretched out his other hand too and said, "Sister! I am privileged. The greater the dirt your unclean hands transmit to my hands, the more fortunate would I consider myself to be." Kennedy then held Sister's sullied hands with both his hands and said, "Sister! I feel very humble. What you are doing is unparalleled. It is beyond comparison. For the first time in my life I have seen this kind of dedicated and selfless service. What you are doing is real humanitarian service. My heart is overwhelmed with compassion and love."

Later, in India and in the United States, Senator Kennedy would often very fondly recall this incident with great pride and admiration.

Who was this Sister with the sullied hands? She was Sister Agnes. Her old name was Subhashini Das. She was a student of Mother Teresa at the Loreto convent. Das had the privilege of becoming Mother's first disciple on 19th March 1948.

Later Bangladesh was liberated and took its place in the comity of nations as an independent country. Many refugees returned to their homeland. Some never went back. Today the 'Nirmal Kennedy Centre', named after the Senator, is home to disabled, deaf and dumb children, deserted women and the aged, struggling with death. All of them are looked after with tender care and love.

## **PERMISSION OF A DICTATOR**

**T**his happened in the year 1973. Ethiopia in northeast Africa was in the grip of a terrible famine resulting in widespread hunger, malnutrition, sickness, and untimely deaths. When Mother learnt of this crisis she visited Ethiopia to see things for herself. What she witnessed was appalling. Intense misery and pain was rampant. Mother strongly felt the need for the setting up of one of her Homes there. But when she had consultations with the concerned persons, Mother soon realized that the establishment of a Home in that country was going to be an uphill task.

The reason was the religious bigotry of the then Emperor Haile Selaissi. Mother also learnt that only the Emperor and nobody else could grant permission to start a new institution in Ethiopia. In the past, several religious and social organizations had come forward for providing relief from misery and sickness to the people of Ethiopia but the Emperor did not allow anyone to come in. In his thinking, matters such as humanitarian service and love were irrelevant. He was interested only in institutions that were helpful in sustaining himself in power.

The Emperor was a despotic and tyrannical ruler. It was difficult to get access to him. But Mother was not the one to give up easily. Her determination to have her way for her humanitarian work was later to become legendary. Mother soon learnt in confidence from an influential person that she could have access to the Emperor only through his daughter Princess Selaissi, whom he loved immensely.

After repeated efforts Mother was finally able to meet the Princess. Without beating about the bush, Mother explained to the Princess that she wanted to open a Home of the Missionaries of Charity in Ethiopia to provide tender love and care to the poor, sick and dying. Mother talked very plainly. She was direct, to the

point, without any diplomatic verbiage or political undertones. The Princess was deeply impressed by Mother's ideas. After all, Mother only wanted permission to do humanitarian work in her country. The Princess soon got Mother an appointment with her father, the Emperor. Mother patiently waited for the appointed day.

The atmosphere in the Palace was tense. Sitting there, Mother was apprehensive and feared that it may not be easy to set up a Home in that country. Mother prayed to God.

The Emperor had not come. Instead, he had sent his representative to talk to Mother. He was a top ranking officer of the palace who had come to first gather information from Mother about her plans in Ethiopia. He also informed Mother that in this critical period of severe famine, already many charity organizations were at work. He felt that the number of organizations/ persons already working was possibly more than adequate.

Mother assured him that she and her associates would only serve the sick, the disabled, the aged and the dying destitute with tender care. The officer still had strong reservations. He enquired, "Where from will you arrange the money for service? How will you arrange medicines?"

Mother, with her finger pointed towards the sky, said, "Please rest assured that we will not ask you for anything. Our Sisters are well trained in nursing. We will bring our own medicines. These Sisters are dedicated to service. We are seeking only permission to work here in your country."

The officer also diplomatically asked Mother whether she or her Order would embark upon a religious conversion campaign and proselytizing, under the garb of service. Mother replied, "No! No! Not at all. Our institution is dedicated to the service of humanity. Our work is to enlighten the people with the light of God's love. I only remind people of God. Any one can pray according to one's own faith or religion. Of course we believe that along with our service and medicines, it is also important to pray."

That arrogant officer's sharp tone had gradually mellowed. He now understood that all that Mother wanted to do was serve the poor and sick in his country. Throughout, Mother, as was her nature, remained warm and unassuming, but firm.

Finally Mother was ushered in to the presence of the Emperor. The contrast could not have been greater. Before the tall and hulky Emperor in his full military regalia stood the frail, diminutive and wrinkle-faced Mother in her ordinary crumpled cotton saree.

The Emperor's reaction belied all expectations. In very few words, the Emperor made himself clear. He said, "I have heard a lot about your good work. I am very happy that you have come here. You can start your work here."

Mother opened the office of Hailey's Missionaries of Charity in Ethiopia with great zeal and enthusiasm. Her service activities started spreading love. Ever since, no one had any cause to complain.

Just after one year, there was a military coup and the rule of Emperor Selaissi came to an end. He was imprisoned along with his family. The eighty-one-year old Emperor died in jail.

Nobody was allowed to meet the Emperor before he died. Mother Teresa was the only one who had the privilege to meet the Emperor in jail. There she prayed along with the Emperor.

The successor Revolutionary government treated the entire family of the Emperor very shoddily. Later, with the efforts and influence of Mother the family was released.

In the last 23 years, the Missionaries of Charity has spread the message of love in the otherwise dreary life of the poor people of Ethiopia. It is no wonder that the people all over the world repose their faith in this institution.

The dictatorial Emperor had created a beautiful history by allowing Mother to open her Home in his country, just about a year before he was deposed. Only Mother could have brought about such a unique change in the heart of a tyrannical Emperor!

## **WHEN THE ARMY TOOK SISTERS INTO CUSTODY**

**F**ame of the work done by the Missionaries of Charity was spreading far and wide in India. Its work was increasingly being recognized in countries outside India also. Mother had already started getting messages from other countries about the urgent need for Mother's Homes in those countries as well. But in many cases Mother had to politely decline. She would say, "I do not have Sisters to send abroad. Our resources are limited. We have too much to do in India." She would also add, "I am always short of time. I want to fully concentrate on training of newly recruited Sisters."

Many years later, in deference to the wishes of the Pope, Mother opened her first Home abroad. On 26 July 1965, the first Home of the Missionaries of Charity beyond the shores of India was started in Venezuela. In Venezuela too, the people were poor like their brothers and sisters in India. Mother selected three of her most competent, courageous and compassionate sisters to work there. The Sisters decided to live among the poor and the sick. They learnt the native Spanish language that enabled them to understand the local problems there.

Thereafter, there were more and more demands for Mother's Homes. Many young women also came forward to join the Order as Sisters. In 1970 Mother opened a training centre in London for the young women of Europe and America, who volunteered to become Sisters in her Order. Mother herself would supervise the training.

In 1973, Mother shifted this training centre to Rome. At Rome, Sisters were trained through practical work in actual service of the sick and the disabled. The Sisters had to learn to pray with people suffering from loneliness. Sisters were also taught how to

comfort and cheer the dying people in hospital with love and tender care. Only when Sisters became proficient in their job after this exacting training would Mother assign them to more difficult tasks such as helping people in epidemics, earthquakes or wars.

In wars at different times and at different places around the world, hundreds of soldiers lost their limbs. Many innocent people were also seriously injured in the cross firing and bombardment. The relief measures by the respective governments were often not adequate in such situations. Mother's trained Sisters would step in such times to provide relief and care.

A brutal conflict had erupted in Israel in 1973. Gaza strip in Palestine under the occupation of Israel was in the grip of fierce fighting. Egypt and Israel were engaged in a gruesome war. U.S was backing Israel. Neither Egypt nor Israel was prepared to back off. The ghastly war had rendered thousands of Palestinians homeless.

Mother sent her best Sisters to the battle ground. In the midst of fierce fighting, these Sisters served the wounded soldiers. Turn-by-turn, the Sisters would take the bare minimum time off to go to their Home for taking food or rest.

Espionage by either side was common. One day around mid-day, suddenly a posse of Israeli soldiers under orders of their Commandant descended on the Home of Missionaries of Charity. Such was the atmosphere of distrust that the Commandant suspected even the Sisters of espionage.

The soldiers fired in the air in order to frighten the Sisters but the sisters did not lose their cool. Then in his language, the Commandant ordered the Sisters to face the wall and raise their hands. The Sisters dutifully complied with the orders.

The Commandant now ordered one of the soldiers to search them. For the first time, the Sisters were frightened and started praying. They were apprehensive that the insensitive soldiers may use the pretext of searching them to outrage their modesty. And then, suddenly a miracle of sorts happened. A local worker of Mother's Home with his hands raised came shouting, "They are Sisters of Mother Teresa. They have come from India. Do not ill-treat them."

The Commandant was familiar with Mother Teresa's name. He had also heard several stories about the humanitarian services of Mother. But the Commandant had never seen her Homes or Sisters and was thus not familiar with the dress of Mother's Sisters. He immediately ordered, "Leave them alone. I have made a terrible mistake. I mistook them to be spies. My past experience has been very bitter. Some women would spy under the garb of being nuns. But these women can't be spies. I am sure that no one would do such an unholy thing while wearing the holy dress of Mother Teresa's Order." A major tragedy was providentially averted!

The sincerity of Mother and her humanitarian work was well known the world over. In the words of Father Henry, her widespread service of the poor would not allow Mother Teresa's name to be forgotten even in the fury of war. Her only religion is service. And that too for the unwanted and the uncared for. They have no time for either politics or espionage!

## INDIRA GANDHI SENDS VEGETABLES

Mother had a very close friendship with Indira Gandhi, the former powerful Prime Minister of India. At a function organized in Mother's honour, Indira Gandhi had once said, "Meeting her fills the heart with infinite compassion and humility. You feel the power of tenderness and the energy of love." The personal relationship between Mother and Indira Gandhi was so deep that whenever Mother called her on phone, even in the midst of her busy schedule, Indira Gandhi would immediately take the call to talk to her. Indira Gandhi had given standing instructions to her personal staff that she should be connected immediately whenever there was a call from Mother.

Even in the midst of her numerous preoccupations, Indira Gandhi would not forget about Mother's activities. She would often find time to ring up the office of the Missionaries of Charity. She would call Mother to discuss the problems of her Homes. In Mother's absence she would enquire even from the local Sister Superior about the activities of the institution. She would invariably make arrangements for whatever help or assistance was needed. Indira Gandhi would also very promptly respond to Mother's letters.

Once it so happened that at dinner time at the children's Home at Delhi there was only rice. There were no vegetables and pulses to be served with rice. There was no money either to buy vegetables or pulses. This kind of hand-to-mouth existence was, however, not unusual at Mother's Homes.

In the prevailing situation there seemed to be no choice but to plan to serve hot rice with mere salt. Right then, a van arrived at the main gate of Missionaries of Charity. It was from the Prime Minister's house. It was loaded with vegetables from the kitchen garden of the Prime Minister. The Prime Minister's daughter-in-law Sonia Gandhi had sent a small two-line note with a large amount

of homegrown fresh green vegetables. Mother Teresa was jubilant. She said, "Sister! Let us cook the fresh vegetables right away. God always comes to our rescue. Let the children eat to their heart's content. You Sisters must also enjoy the rice and vegetables." As an after thought, in the style of a meticulous manager, she added, "But make sure that you first cook those vegetables that are likely to perish quickly and the rest can be cooked the next day."

Indira Gandhi would often unexpectedly call Mother to ask, "Mother! Plenty of vegetables are available in the kitchen garden. Can they be utilized?" And Mother would invariably respond, "Send all that is available. Every bit is useful for us and would be fully utilized. God bless you."

Once in her Darjeeling Home, Mother slipped and fell down. She had injured her leg. When Indira Gandhi learnt about the accident, she immediately then to Darjeeling to see and comfort Mother. In spite of her busy schedule, Indira Gandhi felt that it was necessary for her to visit Mother. She did not mind even though it involved cancellation of several prior engagements. The bonds of mutual affection and regard between Mother and Indira Gandhi were very strong.

During Indira Gandhi's tenure as the Prime Minister of India, Mother Teresa had been granted special exemption from the country's tough Foreign Exchange Regulation Act. For her service activities, Mother Teresa received, every year, from abroad substantial amounts of donations in dollars and other foreign currencies. In addition she got hundreds of dollars in the shape of a variety of prizes. In relaxation of the provisions of the Act, Mother wanted to keep part of this amount abroad as she needed foreign exchange to open new Homes abroad and to expand the existing ones. She did not want to utilize all the money she got from abroad in India alone and wanted to have the option to utilize it in other poor countries also.

Exemptions from the Foreign Exchange Regulation Act had indeed facilitated Mother's work all around the globe. Her credibility was very high. None of the hundreds and thousands of donors all over the world ever felt the need to question her about the manner in which she spent the money. She had full liberty to utilize the money received in any part of the world.

## THE AROMA OF FOOD

**M**other had arrived in the Philippines to open three new Homes. It was the year 1987. Everyone had eagerly looked forward to Mother's arrival. We were hoping to use Mother's presence to place our problems before her.

The Philippines is a developing country with widespread poverty. It already had a number of Mother's Homes. The headquarters of the Missionaries of Charity is at Manila. It is located in Tondo, one of the poorest localities of Manila and is named the Tayuman Home. This poor locality has a large number of T.B patients.

In this locality, there were many T.B. patients who looked old even at the early age of forty or fifty. In the absence of nutritive food, their T.B. medication was not effective and they were not fully cured of T.B. In fact they could not afford even two square meals a day. These persons were also not sick enough to be kept in Mother's Home. A large number of them lived in nearby slums and got at least one-time food and medicines from the Home. These patients somehow eked out their living with the help from Mother's Home.

Many amongst them were trained and proficient drivers, mechanics, masons and carpenters. Many women were perfect artisans in the local handicraft 'Capiz'<sup>8</sup>. However their illness had incapacitated them and they were unable to do any work or take up employment.

Driver Castillo was one of the T.B. patients. He was fortunate to be cured of T.B. as he was regular in taking medicines and would also get milk at Mother's Home. Castillo was only 43 but

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<sup>8</sup> Capiz is made by hot pressing and bonding of powdered sea shells into beautiful objects of decoration.

his eyesight was weak. He said, M'am! If I get glasses I can resume my work."

I mentioned this to Sister Superior to find out if we could solve the problem of Castillo and others like him. Her response was, "Mrs. Mehta! Do you know that 50% of the persons in this locality have got weak eyesight? They either need glasses or treatment of their eyes." She added, "There is a lot to be done. But at present we are barely able to treat them for their illness and save them from starvation. At present, treatment of eyes is something beyond our reach."

I was still weighed down by my guilt in not being able to help Castillo. And then, by sheer happy coincidence, Manisha Chhugani stepped in to help. She was an Indian by origin. Her ancestors had migrated three generations ago to the Philippines. She had been my student also. I had taught her and some other ladies Hindi language and Indian culture. She was an optometrist and had a large showroom and store of spectacles in Cubao city in Metro Manila.

My husband, Manisha and I and her two technicians set up a camp at the Tayuman Home for a weekly check-up and testing of eyes and distribution of spectacles. Every week, on the day preceding the day of the camp, the Sisters would distribute 50 to 60 serially numbered slips in the slums for prospective recipients for the following day. Under this arrangement, hundreds of poor persons received treatment for their eye-related ailments and were provided with spectacles. Each spectacle cost about two hundred Pesos but was given free to the patient. It was no problem to arrange the money from like-minded Indian friends. With their eyesight restored, a large number of poor persons were no longer a burden but had instead become regular bread winners for their families.

In the camp, we suspected that one person had come to get glasses a second time even though he had been given glasses only a few days earlier. I mentioned this to Sister. The Sister interrogated him and very quickly the frightened man came out with truth.

He was Felix, a forty-year-old machine mechanic. He now revealed that he had come to get glasses not for a second time but

for the third time. Today he had put on a black cap and dark glasses to avoid detection.

Felix narrated his story. The first time his glasses were snatched and sold by his younger brother because Felix could not repay fifty pesos that he had borrowed from him. The second time he himself sold the spectacles for twenty pesos.

I could not restrain myself. I was very angry and told him, "Felix! Do you know what you have done? You have sold eye-glasses costing pesos two hundred for only twenty pesos. Can you imagine how much money, time and labour is required for these camps? You have broken our trust." Manisha was also angry and she too scolded Felix for his greed.

Felix started crying. He was full of remorse and very meekly said, "M'am, I am ashamed to have betrayed your trust. I promise, I will never repeat this mistake." Still in tears, he narrated his whole story.

"Day before yesterday, in the evening I was hungry. As I walked along the street, I passed the MacDonald's restaurant and a whiff of air brought a strong fragrance of finger chips to me. I was hungry and this scent only added to the intensity of my hunger. I found it difficult to control myself. I had no money. My only possession was the new spectacles. An evil thought entered my mind. Why not sell the spectacles and satisfy my hunger? But then I also realized how lovingly Sister serves us and provides us with medicines and milk. My inner conscience told me that I would be committing a sin by selling glasses. I turned away. But the burning hunger and scent of delicious snacks did not leave me. I felt very miserable. I finally succumbed and negotiated a deal to sell the glasses to the bearer of MacDonalts for twenty pesos. In return he gave me plenty of finger chips."

"What would he do with those glasses? They are for correction of eye sight and are numbered." Manisha chipped in. Felix replied, "He liked the frame M'am. He said he would have sun glasses fixed in that frame."

I was upset. Manisha was upset too. We had mixed feelings of anger and sorrow. On the one hand we felt as if we were fools

wasting our time, labour and money. We should wind up the camp and go home. On the other, we felt sorry for the circumstances of persons like Felix. All pious values seemed to crumble on an empty stomach!

In the evening at the time of prayer we narrated the entire incident to Mother and sought her guidance. Mother gave an enigmatic smile as if she was telling us that we had not understood the reality.

After few seconds, Mother explained, "A hungry person can neither pray nor work. Only those who have experienced it can understand the agony of hunger. Only a few are strong enough to restrain themselves despite their hunger but others are not so strong and would go to any extent to satisfy their hunger. It is wrong to blame them." Mother continued, "My child! Hungry persons must first be given food and thirsty persons should be given water. Similarly, persons without clothes should be given clothes and sick persons should be provided with treatment and medicines." Mother affectionately patted me on my back. The feel of that affectionate touch is still happily etched in my memory.

I often ask myself. Were we not too harsh on Felix?

## SISTER MARLYN AND DAVID

In the year 1987 Mother had come to Manila, capital of the Philippines to open new Homes. After her prayers, Mother was sitting at the Tayuman Home. Today she was relatively free and relaxed. I started the conversation. "Mother! In a few days you would be leaving Manila. What would you like me to do when you are away? Is there any special responsibility that you would like to assign to me?" "I would be glad to take up any such work." I added.

It seemed as if Mother had anticipated the question. She spoke only one sentence. "You travel to different countries. Whenever you have an opportunity, you should visit my Sisters and take care of them." I could immediately grasp the deep significance of what Mother had said. Sisters are dedicated to the service of all. They almost totally sever their connections with their near and dear ones, leaving their country, home, parents, sisters, brothers and friends. Mother's Home is their home. Service is their religion and faith. Caring for the sick and dying is their sole vocation that is their work - that is their entertainment. But they do not cease to be human beings- they have their inner feelings- moments of their happiness and sadness, their ups and their downs. Sometimes they need someone to confide in and share their feelings with. It is indeed necessary that they should also be looked after. I was extremely happy that Mother had reposed her confidence in me in this very intimate and sensitive need of the Sisters.

Very soon an opportunity came my way. Marlyn was one of the Sisters at the Tondo Home. I noticed that lately she was unusually quiet and sad. Marlyn was from Kerala in India. She was highly educated and had been a Sister for ten years. She had been working at Manila for the last three years.

My friends had sent a large number of Christmas gifts received by them to me to be donated to Mother's Homes. Mother's nearest

Home was 25 kms away and whenever when my friends were not in a position to themselves undertake a trip to the Home, they would send the gifts to my house. The items would include every conceivable thing such as foodstuffs, clothes, shoes, medicines etc. Old furniture, old newspapers and cash too were sent. A multinational company sent its 'Magnolia' brand cartons of milk. My garage acted as a temporary storehouse for such items. From time to time, I would invite Sisters when a vanload of material had accumulated. They would take all the materials to the Homes. Just after Christmas, my garage was full of gifted material and I had called the Sisters to my house.

As in the past, Marlyn and three other Sisters came. I knew that she was especially fond of orchids and another beautiful tropical plant known as 'birds of heaven'. I would request her to take a few of those plants from my garden. She liked to offer these flowers before the statue of Mother Mary. That day also she took a few pots at my request. After the Sisters had left, I again had an intuitive feeling that Marlyn was not her usual self and was possibly looking for a chance to talk to me in private.

True enough, after about an hour Sister Marlyn called me on phone. In a hesitant voice she said, "Mrs. Mehta! Could you spare some time for me? Could you take the trouble of coming here today or tomorrow?" My intuition was right!

The next day I went to meet Sister Marlyn at Mother's Home. She was waiting for me. She took me to a small office room. At that time in the afternoon, it was time for rest and the place was very quiet. Sister Marlyn opened her heart to me.

Mrs. Mehta! I want your help. As per rules we keep only limited contact with our family. My parents are not alive. I have seven brothers and sisters. They are all happy. The youngest brother David is most educated amongst all but he is without a job. When I decided to become a Sister, he entreated me not to do so. He was 14 at that time. I was his guardian. We were very much attached to each other. He wanted me to become a Sister only after he had settled down in life."

She continued, "There were many stumbling blocks in his education. Now he has somehow completed his education but is

without employment. He has done M.A. in English literature. My heart weeps when I get his letters full of desperation and dejection. I have taken the vows of our Order and I try to distance myself from family matters and control my emotions but often I lose my sleep. I get a feeling of guilt that I left a fourteen-year-old boy to the mercy of the other brothers and sisters, none of whom came forward to help him. Even for his education, he had to work hard during the day at a bookshop to pay for his fees, and study at night. Yet he always got first division in the examinations."

I was attentively listening to Sister Marlyn. She was encouraged to continue. "David writes that in spite of his post-graduate degree he is being offered the job of only an unskilled labourer. He has knocked at the doors of innumerable offices and companies, but with no luck. He has now lost all hopes of landing an appropriate job. One of his friends earns plenty of money in the illegal trade of narcotics and has offered to give him a well-paid job but David has rightly declined. He has also promised to me that he would never associate himself with any illegal activities.

"He has now made a small business plan. He can start this business if he gets a loan of ten thousand rupees. It involves opening up of a small bookshop at a footpath kiosk. He also plans to supply magazines to households at their doorstep every day. Because of a high literacy level in Kerala, newspapers and magazines are expected to sell well. He also wishes to supplement this with the opening of an open bookshop, along with a tea-stall at the railway station. The tea-stall owner is agreeable to let David set up a bookshop on his premises because he feels that the bookshop will bring greater clientele and boost his sales too. David desperately needs the initial Rs. 10,000." Having poured out her heart to me, Sister Marlyn seemed quite relieved.

I assured Sister Marlyn that I would make some arrangements for her brother to get the initial money.

Sister was quick to clarify that it would only be a loan to David and that I would have to accept repayment of the amount. I nodded. That night I rang up my father in India. At my request he immediately sent the money to David. Four days later, David had received the amount at his home in Kerala. After a week, Sister Marlyn got a letter from David informing her of the receipt

of money. At last the Sister was at peace and had shed her worries.

David had set for himself a repayment schedule with a quarterly instalment of one thousand rupees and he religiously adhered to it. Within a little over two years, he was able to repay the entire amount.

David had kept his promise by fully repaying the loan and had risen in my esteem. I returned the entire amount to David and wrote to him, "Please expand your shop. With best wishes. A friend of Sister Marlyn".

Mother Teresa was of the view, "Sisters and Brothers are also human beings. They also feel pleasure and pain like others. They serve the entire world. Families of Sisters are also part of the same world. They deserve our help."

## THE STORY OF SISTER CIPHONG

This is the story of the Cebu port of the Philippines. For the last two years, Sister Ciphong had been working at Mother's Home in Cebu. She was a Singaporean of Chinese origin. She was about 27 years of age and had taken a nun's vows some nine years earlier. She looked exceptionally pretty even in the simple uniform of the Missionaries of Charity. She had a very fair complexion, her nose, like that of most Chinese origin persons, was slightly flat and her eyes were small. She had a very attractive face. She had small beautiful hands but imprints of hard work were visible in their roughness. I was curious to know why such a pretty young girl had become a nun at the tender age of eighteen.

Cebu is the commercial capital and the second largest city of the Philippines. A branch of the Mahaveer Philippines Foundation had been opened here only recently. This institution and its parent 'Bhagwan Mahaveer Vikalang Sahayata Samiti' in Jaipur in India fits for free the artificial 'Jaipur Foot' to the disabled in India and in many other countries including the Philippines. Once after seeing the good work done by this institution at its headquarters in Jaipur, Mother Teresa had observed, "You are doing very good work." Mother also did not forget to add that the number of the disabled in the Philippines was also very large.

Mother Teresa had welcomed the setting up in 1987 in Manila of the 'Mahaveer Philippine Foundation' as a sister organization of the 'Bhagwan Mahaveer Vikalang Sahayata Samiti' in India. The Church had played an important role in the dissemination of information about the work of this charitable organization in the provinces. It would organize the bringing of disabled persons to this institution in Manila for fitment of limbs. The priests coordinated the flow of patients from different places to Manila so that they did not have to wait there unnecessarily.

The priests even in remote villages in the interior extended full cooperation.

Sister Ciphong had occasion to talk to Cardinal Sin about the good work done by Mahaveer Philippine Foundation in the Philippines and the excellent rehabilitation of the disabled after the fitment of the Jaipur Foot. This was the time when Cardinal Sin, the head of the Roman Catholic Church in the Philippines was a hero for the entire country. He had played a central role in toppling the dictatorial and corrupt President Marcos. Marcos and his wife Imelda had to flee the country and Corazon (popularly called Cory) Aquino was elected as the President of the Philippines. At a function at the Tayuman Home, Mother Teresa told Cory Aquino, "If these disabled persons are walking like normal persons today, the credit goes to the Mahaveer Philippine Foundation. The Foundation and its parent in India are doing yeoman service in many countries around the world."

Sister Ciphong was responsible for Mother's Cebu Home. When a second centre of the Mahaveer Philippine Foundation was opened in Cebu to provide easy access to the disabled of that region to the Jaipur Foot, my husband and I had to frequently go to Cebu to oversee the functioning of the Centre. Sister Ciphong would regularly bring disabled persons for fitment of the Jaipur Foot and this brought us together. My relationship with her became close. Other workers also became very friendly. It was a very congenial environment where Christian sisters, a Mindanao Muslim worker Mohammed and I, a Jain, had become very close associates in the service of the disabled. Disabled persons coming to the Home of Mother Teresa would ask the meaning of Mahaveer. They wanted to know about the basis of the Jain religion. I was only too glad to explain that Mahaveer, a historical person, is the last of the 24 'Tirthankaras' or enlightened souls of Jain religion, all of whom spread the message of compassion, non-violence and love towards all creatures. The workers would relish the vegetarian dishes brought by the Indian families. The humanitarian activities had broken all the barriers of caste, sect and religion!

Then we heard about the transfer of Sister Ciphong. She was shortly to go to Hongkong to assume charge as Sister Superior there. Three long years of pleasant friendship with her had gone

by unnoticed and too soon. Time had flown. On her way from Cebu to Hongkong, she had come to Manila. A day before she was to leave for Hong Kong I went to meet her in the Tondo Home in Manila where she was staying. I asked her, "Sister are there any instructions for me?"

She said, "Please continue to look after Anthony." Anthony was a ten-year old disabled child. He was an inmate at the children's orphanage of the Tondo Home of Manila. His head was big, thrice the average size. The rest of his body, his hands and his legs were small and very weak, like that of a two-three year old child. His weak neck could hardly bear the weight of his unusually heavy head. To support his head, normally he used to sit by the wall. Whenever I visited the Tondo Home, Anthony was very happy to see me but I was slightly frightened to see his disproportionate and hideous body.

Sister Ciphong during her frequent visits from Cebu to Manila had encouraged me to become a guardian of Anthony. But I could never steel myself to take him in my lap. His unsightly body generated a feeling of pity but not love. But I never let my feelings be known to him. I used to play with him. Every Thursday I used to take plenty of halwa (an Indian sweet dish) to the Tondo Home. As soon as he saw me he would start saying 'Sarap! Sarap!' (meaning delicious). Indian halwa was very much liked in the Philippines. Particularly children and aged persons were very fond of the soft and sweet hot halwa. On the day of my weekly visit, Anthony would only eat Halwa and would not at all touch rice and fish or anything else.

Sister Ciphong told me, "Very soon, an American family is adopting Anthony. Till then you take care of him." I consented.

I may not meet Sister Ciphong again for years. Or may be never again in my life! I was always curious to know why such a pretty girl at a very young age had taken to a monastic life and become a nun. I had so far held myself back from asking her this question but at the time of our parting, I could no longer restrain my curiosity and finally put the question to her. In an emotion-choked voice, she narrated her whole story. It was a very touching story that is going to remain etched in my memory forever. Sister

had taken a promise from me that I would never disclose her real name. I have not broken her trust and kept that promise.

In the words of Sister Ciphong, "I was born in Singapore, in one of its pretty sectors. By local yardsticks, I was considered to be extraordinarily pretty. I have two brothers and two sisters. We three girls were older and the two brothers were younger. The difference in age between us siblings was no more than one year. When I was sixteen, my sisters were fifteen and fourteen respectively. My two sisters were not so pretty. I was also always ahead in studies and sports. I was also sent abroad to play basket ball.

"All in all, I would receive compliments at home and school and in society as well. I enjoyed it. But my two younger sisters were unhappy at the unfavourable comparisons and gradually became jealous of me. I was gifted with beautiful features, good health and talent. Why had God chosen me alone, and why were these graces denied to my sisters? I had no answer to this question. The two brothers were also not too bright in studies."

Sister Ciphong continued, "My parents were proud of me. But my brothers and sisters disliked their love for me. A common thread of jealousy towards me brought all four of them close to each other. I felt isolated. Together, they were always cheerful but whenever they saw me they would become silent and turn their faces away. What was my fault? I had not deprived anyone of anything nor snatched anything from anybody?"

"I was selected as Miss 'Teen' in the school. Many boys wanted to be friends with me. I had gained prominence and importance in social functions and gatherings.

"But I had no peace of mind. It was a puzzle to me as to why one person got more while someone else got less. I was pining for the love of my brothers and sisters. But all my efforts to get their affection failed. I was appreciated outside but was despised by my siblings at home. My parents too had no answer to this jealousy among blood brothers and sisters.

"During that period, Mother Teresa had come to Singapore. I had accompanied my parents to meet her. The other sisters and





Mother Teresa receiving the "Bharat Shiromani Award-1991" from the President Dr. Shankar Dayal Sharma at Rashtrapati Bhavan in New Delhi on Nov. 8, 1992

Mother Teresa with the then President of Philippines, Corazon Aquino, at one of Mother's Homes





The President N. Sanjiva Reddy presenting the "Bharat Ratna" to Mother Teresa in New Delhi on March 22, 1980

Pope John Paul with Mother during his visit to India





Mother with former Prime Minister, Smt. Indira Gandhi

The joy of service



brothers did not come along. I was very happy to have a glimpse of this universally admired woman. I asked to myself. What was there in this lean and thin short-statured woman with ordinary appearance that millions of people loved and respected her? What is that secret of love for which I am thirsty?"

Sister Ciphong continued with her narration of her tryst with Mother as well as her destiny. "I met Mother Teresa. Her affectionate touch brought tears into my eyes. It was as if someone had applied balm to my strained and painful nerves. I gathered enough courage and said in a meek voice, "Mother! I want to meet you alone." Mother smilingly responded, "Come at four." She looked straight into my eyes and I felt her glance straight reaching my heart. From her enigmatic smile I felt as if she had gauged the agony in my heart.

"Sharp at four, I was with her. With one hand she held my two hands while she put her other hand on my head. Sitting in this posture, I shared my innermost feelings and my entire agony with Mother. I then asked her, "How would I get the reciprocation for my love? Mother I want love. What should I do, Mother?"

"Mother said, "My child... only when you love God... love Him through the service to the poorest of the poor... Think it over ..... surrender yourself to God ... love Him ...."

"My life had got a totally new direction. I was pining for love. I now get it from thousands of people. Unlimited, love."

Sister Ciphong had really opened her heart before me, perhaps as never before. There was now a peaceful glow on her face as she finished her narration. It seemed to me as if the sharing of her innermost feelings had taken a big load off her mind!

"Are you happy?" I asked her directly. "Very, very much. You know, we get the blue-bordered saree after three years and we take the final vow after training for nine years. Any Sister can leave at any time. Even after nine years one can leave. There is no compulsion whatsoever."

"Shall I tell you one thing, Mrs. Mehta?" she said, and continued, "No amount of compulsion or coercion can force anyone

to undertake this work. By worldly standards, it is not exactly a life of comfort. Even the temptation of lakhs of rupees cannot push anyone to do it. We do it because we see God in each sick person, in each dying person and in each miserable person. We see ourselves as serving God. This is at the heart of all the service work that we willingly do. This is our inspiration. This is the secret of our strength."

## YOU ARE MY CHIEF ENGINEER

**I**t was a call from Sister Maria. Sixty-five year old Sister Maria was originally from Italy. She was tall, healthy and charming, with a fair complexion and blue eyes. I had a very warm and friendly relationship with her. I visited the Home regularly and every time I was ready to leave I would request Sister to call me if any help was needed at any time. Sister now called up to tell me that wood was urgently needed as the available stock in the Home had become wet due to exposure to rains.

Many sawmills and furniture manufacturing companies would routinely donate their stocks of short remnants and scrap wood to Mother's Homes, free of charge. Scrap wood and broken furniture items are also donated by individual households. These wood pieces are used as firewood to boil water for washing the dirty clothes of sick persons in the Homes. I was mentally trying to think of friends who may could some wood scrap.

Sister Maria said, "This time some large pieces of wood are required." I enquired, "Sister, why long pieces? Do you want them for making benches or cots?" Sister clarified, "No, the wood is required to make coffins. This morning we have found five corpses of children aged between six months and four years lying outside the Home. Small coffin boxes are needed." Dead bodies! Coffins! All upset me. Instinctively, I said, "Excuse me, Sister! I cannot arrange wood for coffins. I find it very repulsive to associate myself with dead bodies and coffins."

Sister tried to reason with me, "My child! You have not driven these children to their deaths. Now that they have become one with God, whether we like it or not, their last rites have to be performed. This is none of your fault."

I was still not able to reconcile myself to the stark reality of death. "Excuse me Sister! You better entrust this job to some one else. I beg to be excused."

Poor families that cannot afford to bury their dead children, or sometime even adults, would quietly leave the dead bodies outside the Home in the darkness of the night. Sisters had probably served these very children when they were alive and struggling with death. Those who recovered would return to their parents. Because of stark poverty, malnutrition and sickness, many could still not be saved from the jaws of death. In death, they were again left outside the Home. As if the responsibility to take care of these children both in life and in death rested on none else but Mother's Home!

Then suddenly, as if by divine intervention, an unexpected development took place. M/s Four Winds, moving company, had shipped some of our household goods from abroad in wooden containers, measuring 12' + 10'. After unpacking our goods, when the employees of the company wanted to take away these containers, out of sheer curiosity I asked them, "Who do these empty containers belong to? To us, or to the company?"

The supervisor hesitatingly replied, "M'am! Of course they are yours. But what use would you have for them. You would have problems even in storing or disposing them. Nobody wants to keep them. That is why our usual practice is to take them away. If you wish to keep them, please speak to our Manager."

An idea flashed in my mind. This wood could be very usefully utilized. The five large sized wooden boxes of good quality plywood and excellent hard wood could be very useful in Mother's Homes, even in uses other than making coffin boxes. My mental block for coffins still remained! I would ask Sister to use wood sent by me only as firewood. I asked the employees of the company to wait.

I rang up the office of M/s Four Winds and spoke to the Manager Mr. Espiritu. Without any hesitation, he said "M'am. The containers are yours and you can keep them." I shared with him my idea for using the wood. I also requested him to instruct his staff to take the containers apart and stack the dismantled pieces nicely and that I would pay for this work. This, I reasoned to myself, would facilitate dispatch of the entire lot of wood to Mother's Home in one truck. Mr. Espiritu said he would call me back after ten minutes.

After a few minutes he called me, "M'am. We will get these boxes dismantled and for a small additional charge for hiring the truck we could also deliver the wood at the Home of Mother Teresa."

I felt very good. Things were falling in place. The hassles of getting the containers dismantled or transported through the crowded streets of Manila all the way to Mother's Home were conveniently getting resolved without my having to look for transport arrangements elsewhere.

It was Mr. Espiritu's turn now. He asked me, "M'am. May I ask you, which country you come from?" "I am an Indian." I said proudly.

"Are all Indians kind?" he asked and added, "You are doing something good in my country. I would extend my fullest co-operation. By the way, are you Catholic or Protestant?"

I replied, "I am neither. I am Jain but I am associated with the humanitarian and compassionate work of Mother."

I was extremely pleased at the way things had unfolded that day. By the evening the full truckload of ply wood and wooden pieces had reached the Delpan Home. Sister Maria called. She said, "Thank you. This wood is of immense use and will come in very handy for us." I knew that some wood would, for sure, be used for coffins. During the day, I had reasoned with myself and ultimately banished my illogical revulsion to making of coffins. The Sister later informed me that she had indeed used some of the wood for coffins and the rest had been stored for future appropriate use.

After this experience, I took the opportunity of publicizing the fruitful use of packing containers in the monthly newsletter of our Ladies Club of the Asian Development Bank. It greatly appealed to many families relocating to Manila from over 55 countries, and many of them decided to donate the containers in the same way to Mother's Homes. The practice also spread to other multi-lateral organizations such as the numerous UN agencies, the World Bank etc. A new and continuous source of substantial supply of wood for Mother's Homes had opened up.

At the Home, it created a new problem. There was a shortage of covered storage to protect the wood from getting wet in the torrential rains of the Philippines. Already, the Home was facing scarcity of space during the rains even to dry washed clothes. There was no place to play for the lively children. During the long spells of rain all the children, adults and the Sisters had to be confined to the only hall; it would become very crowded and uncomfortable.

I made a suggestion to Sister. "There is enough open space available with us. Let us put an ordinary thatch-roofed hut. From the Ladies Club, we will be able to meet the expenses amongst ourselves. This would help solve many of our problems here."

Sister firmly rejected the idea, "This cannot be done" she said. Politely, I tried to reason with her, "Sister, space is available. I am prepared to supervise the work myself. Expenses would also be taken care of. Then what could be the problem? A thatched-roof hut would be very useful."

Sister said, "It is not as if I am not convinced but in the Home we are not authorized to make even small changes."

I was still perplexed. "But Sister! You are the Sister Superior?" I argued with her. "You can certainly permit such minor things."

Sister smiled but said in a firm tone, "Mother and only Mother takes such decisions. Not only in the Philippines but even in Homes all over the world, any activity to add or remove anything in the Homes cannot be initiated without the specific permission of Mother. That is it." Sister then turned away. It appeared to me as if she was pretending to be busy in her work so as to avoid any further talk on the subject!

I was stunned. Was our feeling of kinship and an emotional sense of belonging and right over Mother's Homes an illusion? It was extraordinary that even a senior Sister serving the Order for the last 25 years could not take a decision concerning some minor requirement of the Home!

I was quite disappointed that the few quintals of wood that were collected with so much effort would now all go waste. Stacks of wood lying in the Home were already getting drenched in the

rain. I was extremely saddened by the turn of events.

I asked Sister, "What do you do in this kind of situation? Is there no way out?" Sister answered, "The decision would be taken when Mother comes here or else it could be discussed if we happen to meet somewhere else. If there is an emergency we can also speak on phone. But certainly not for a thatch hut."

Some doubts flashed through my mind for a fleeting moment. "Is the charge that Mother is an autocratic dogmatist really true?"

By coincidence, the very next month Mother came to Manila and I cornered her. I honestly placed the issue of the construction of a thatch hut in the Home as well as my misgivings before her.

Mother said, "I do not want to make my Homes very comfortable for children. Many sick children are here for treatment. Some parents have left their children here because of their poverty. May be, they will take them back when they are in a position to feed them. Many children are here because their parents are themselves incapacitated by chronic ailments and can no longer look after their children. Our effort is to see that, as soon as circumstances permit, these children go back to their homes."

Mother continued, "As far as a thatched roof hut for storing the wood and daily drying of a large number of inmates' clothes is concerned, let me think."

I pleaded with Mother with conviction and with all my persuasive powers. I even attempted to draw a few sketches on a blank paper and showed it to Mother.

Mother smiled, waved away the paper sketch I had made and said: "Look Sister! Here is my Chief Engineer!"

After this incident, Mother made this spontaneous exchange and her quick-witted remark all the more memorable for me. Whenever I met Mother, she would very affectionately address me, "Hello, my Chief Engineer!" I was also greatly elated by Mother's nickname for me, reflecting as it did the warmth of her feelings towards me. If there was a telephonic conversation, I would also happily identify myself by saying, "Mother, I am your Chief Engineer speaking."

Permission was instantly granted. A large thatched roof hut was soon made and ever since it has been a very useful addition to the Home.

She was the absolute monarch of this great empire of caring. She was in total command. Her decisions were final, to be accepted by all. Presidents, Prime Ministers, top bureaucrats or millionaires all bowed before her. Everything was to be done according to her wishes.

## I WILL NOT PAY TAX

A strange incident took place that day. It revealed an entirely different facet of Mother's personality. A resolute and a tough Mother, otherwise an apostle of compassion! It was the year 1990. Mother Teresa had come to Manila at the invitation of Cardinal Sin, the very powerful and influential Archbishop of the Roman Catholic Church in the Philippines.

A large part of the credit for the non-violent revolution of the 1980s in this country goes to Cardinal Sin. He had very resolutely exposed and opposed the electoral frauds perpetrated by the corrupt incumbent President Marcos. At his call, millions of people had come out on the streets of Manila in support of Corazon (Cory) Aquino to protest against Marcos; they bravely faced and stopped the intimidating columns of tanks of Marcos's army. Nuns, with rosaries in hand, came out of the churches and stood as human shields, blocking the movement of the army tanks.

Marcos had to finally flee the country. Cory Aquino was declared elected as the President of the Philippines.

Cardinal Sin at that time was very much concerned by the untimely deaths of a large number of poor people on account of dreaded diseases such as T.B. and diarrhea. He wanted Mother to set up one more Home i.e., the eleventh Home in the Philippines for the sick and the dying people. Cardinal Sin had consulted President Cory Aquino, who was herself an ardent admirer of Mother and her work. She readily granted permission and also assured all help.

Mother also felt that in the prevailing conditions in Manila, there was an urgent need for opening one more Home there. That meant that one more 'Nirmal Hriday' was to take birth. Mother always insisted to seeing the location for herself before any

new Home was opened. In this case also before finally approving the establishment of the new Home, she was trying to work out a schedule for visiting the site.

Mother was seated in an ordinary office of her Home in the poor locality of Tayuman. My husband and I were sitting with Mother. A few foreign couples were busy talking to Mother about adoption of abandoned children from Mother's Homes. It was evening time. Outside the Home for the aged and the sick located on the sea shore, the breathtaking view of Manila's famous sunset could be seen. The sun's rays, resplendent in their crimson and orange colours were frolicking with the waves. Nature's beauty was there for all to savour as if to remind us that all living beings are equally entitled to enjoy the splendour of nature. There was no discrimination there.

Just at that time two agitated Sisters entered the office. After acknowledging their greetings, Mother asked, "Is everything alright, Sister? Why so much delay? Did you get all the medicines?"

There were clear signs of fatigue, frustration and disappointment on the faces of both the Sisters. Sister Superior informed Mother that the whole day, since seven in the morning, both of them had been shuttling between offices and warehouses of the port and airport. Customs officials were demanding payment of duty.

Mother grimaced when she heard all this. In a steely voice, she said, "I will not pay tax. I am not taking anything from the government. Then why does the government have to ask me for anything? Some generous country has gifted medicines worth lakhs of rupees to us for the poor of this country. The government of this country is demanding tax on these medicines. On what basis?" She repeated even more resolutely, "I will not pay tax."

For a moment there was total silence all around. The kind hearted and affectionate Mother had spoken some unusually strong words. In order to break the prevalent tension I asked for water. After silence for a few more moments, Mother addressed my husband. "Do something Mr. Mehta. Whenever we get medicines from abroad we have to waste a number of days to get them released. There is unnecessary paper work and our service activities

virtually grind to a halt. Please find some long term solution to this problem."

Then pointing her finger towards the persons sitting outside the open window, Mother said, "See, these people have been waiting for their medicines since morning. They have come with lot of hope from far away places." The word had spread that Sisters had gone to clear a truckload of medicines from the customs. The Sisters had returned but there was no sign of the truck, only because the government demanded tax.

There was a background to the story of tax. Even in a developing country such as the Philippines, medicines are very costly placing them beyond the reach of the common man. Unlike India, there is no government price regulating mechanism even for critical life-saving drugs. Prices of medicines are astronomically high. I had noted from my personal experience that even where the same multinational company manufactures the medicines, the prices of medicines in Philippines are twice or four times or sometimes even sixteen times the prices in India. In many cases such as T.B., the patient has to take these drugs for months or years. I have sadly witnessed many people selling their houses, farms and coconut trees in order to pay for medicines. Poor patients have no option but to look for NGOs who distribute medicines free.

To lend a helping hand, many affluent countries such as the USA, Japan, Australia, West European nations etc., send a substantial quantity of medicines as gift to Mother's Homes. In particular, Germany and France were very generous in regularly sending large consignments to Mother's Homes in the Philippines. These medicines in container loads are sometimes sent by air but mostly by ships. Countless cartons are daily off loaded at the port of Manila.

When large consignments came by sea, Sisters would go to the port to take delivery of these medicines. The rates of custom duty on imported medicines were very high. The high rates encouraged smuggling of medicines. People would be tempted to stealthily bring medicines from other countries. In turn, it prompted the government to be very strict in customs clearance of goods. Every time a consignment was to be cleared, Sisters had to certify

that the medicines were meant for free distribution amongst the poor of this country.

Expressing her deep concern, Mother said, "I am returning to Kolkata tomorrow. Mr. Mehta, please meet President Cory. She is very kind hearted and my friend as well. Yesterday, she had come to our Home to distribute sweets and toys amongst the children. Had I then known about this tax problem, I would have myself requested her to waive the tax forever. Now you meet her on my behalf and tell her that this is a request for and from the poor!"

Next day, after a brief stop over at Hong Kong, Mother Teresa reached Kolkata. President Cory would have certainly met us, as the meeting was to be at the instance of Mother Teresa. But we reasoned to ourselves that if the customs duty problem could be resolved with the help of some of our own acquaintances, we could save the meeting with President Cory for another more important task. This other more important task was to get an allotment of a suitable and well-located large plot of land for a new Home and to seek help to raise resources for construction of a building for the Home.

But the need of the hour was to get the current consignment of medicines released. The next day was Saturday. It was a holiday for my husband but local offices were open. My husband was associated with an international organization and he had no official dealings with the local government and yet by some surprising chance the matter was resolved in just a day. Was it divine intervention or the magic of Mother's name or just a coincidence? I would never know!

The former Mayor of Manila Bagatsing was the Chairman of 'Mahaveer Philippine Foundation', the charity established by us to fit the 'Jaipur Foot' (artificial limb) to disabled Filipinos. Bagatsing was of Indian origin but during his heyday as Mayor of Manila had been a very dynamic and powerful personality on the political firmament of the Philippines, second only to the President. He had lost one of his legs in a politically motivated bomb blast and had his artificial limb fitted in USA. Since the establishment of Mahaveer Foundation, he had himself fitted with a Jaipur Foot. I approached him. He was very understanding and said, "No problem Vilma." He fondly called me Vilma instead of Vimla. It started as

an aberration but later as a mark of his regard and love for me, he persisted with Vilma; Vilma Santos is one of the most popular super stars of Filipino films! Occasionally Vilma Santos also helped in Mother's humanitarian activities.

With his still considerable influence, Bagatsing promptly arranged a meeting for us with the then Health Secretary. The Health Secretary had his imposing office in the Quezon City. He met us very warmly. He made a quick call, wrote something in Tagalog<sup>8</sup> on a slip of paper, put it into an envelope and handed over the same to us. He said, "You meet the Under Secretary, Health, Dr. Anthony Periquet right now. He is waiting for you at the seventh floor in this very building."

Dr. Periquet greeted us very warmly, and with a big smile. As a professional doctor, he had known and was a great admirer of our work relating to the Jaipur Foot and the Mahaveer Foundation. Also, we had known each other well as we both happened to live in the same Das-Marinah village in Makati. An ever-smiling face is a hallmark and a great quality reflecting the extremely friendly nature of the Filipino people. The smile is omnipresent throughout the entire country. Smiling, Dr. Periquet was ready for us. He handed over a note to us and said, "You can now clear all the containers of the shipment, without any difficulty." As we were leaving, he added, "You are doing wonderful work."

We thanked him profusely. We also mentioned to him that we were keener to find a long-term solution to the problem. For the current consignment, even if clearance of medicines was somewhat delayed, we would have tried to tide over the problem by purchasing them at, may be, higher prices in the local market. But for a permanent resolution of the problem, we wanted some kind of standing instructions for future, exempting the Missionaries of Charity from payment of duty.

Dr. Periquet smiled as if he was anticipating this question. He explained that it was a major decision and that too for the entire country. He then went inside the room and spoke to someone on phone. Thereafter he told us, "I have just now spoken to the Social Welfare Department. Only that department can do such facilitation. They will give you a form. You will have to give a

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<sup>8</sup> The local language of the Philippines.

standing guarantee on that form that these medicines would always be distributed free and would be utilized for the benefit of citizens of this country only."

There was no hesitation in giving the required guarantee in the name of Mother Teresa and the Missionaries of Charity. Ever since, we got full co-operation from the Customs Department. No one demanded the duty again. It was waived for-ever.

## I AM AN INDIAN BY CHOICE

In 1991 I was with Mother in her Commissioner Lane Home at Delhi. It was three days before Diwali<sup>9</sup> and crackers were bursting all over Delhi. A 10-year old disabled boy came to Mother and expressed his intense desire to burst crackers. Mother said, "Of course, you will burst crackers. But Diwali is still three days away. On Diwali day we all will burst crackers together." The quick-witted child saw an opportunity to pin Mother down, saying, "You promise. You will also burst crackers with us!" In reply Mother affectionately held his head in her hands and shook it. "You naughty boy!" She said. The boy gave a mischievous smile and walked back on his crutches. His eyes shone with joy. In Mother's Homes, Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs and Christians all celebrated all festivals together. The young and the old and Sisters, all shared their joy.

In the course of writing an article, I asked Mother, "Mother, when did you take Indian citizenship?" Mother smiled and said, "About half a century back, in 1948." Mother was very happy that day. In the morning, a group of children from a well-known school of the city had come to visit her Home. Many of those children had very willingly and gladly handed over their pocket money to Mother. It was more than the money they had parted with. It was the feeling of love and concern that these innocent children had shown for the Home of orphan children that touched Mother's heart. Finding Mother in a cheerful mood, I asked her a question. "Mother, why did you choose Indian citizenship?"

Mother replied instantly. She said, "By choice.... I am an Indian by choice while you are an Indian by accident."

I was struck by the intensity of Mother's response. It was a very direct and unequivocal reply. There is a whole and exceptional story of how this foreigner Catholic nun got completely steeped in

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<sup>9</sup> Festival of lights in India.

the spirit of India. Her embracing of the Indian tradition of the spirit of service had attracted the whole world to Mother Teresa, the apostle of service. Her service with love had changed many attitudes in India and abroad.

Earlier, Indian Christians before entering any catholic religious order had to adopt the western dress. This was a simple rule that had existed for decades and would perhaps have continued for several more centuries!

But Mother's adoption of the Indian dress of saree with a blue border displaced all earlier beliefs and regulations. What is surprising is that before adopting this dress, Mother did not seek any permission from anyone. The story of the birth of white cotton saree with blue border is also no less astonishing.

In August 1948, Mother was permitted by the Vatican to leave Loreto convent and establish a new Order. After getting permission, she first of all offered prayers at a chapel. After that she went to the market with a Sister. There she selected a thick textured white saree with a blue border. This saree was the traditional uniform of the municipal sweepress in the city of Kolkata. It was the uniform of a despised section of society. At that time about fifty years ago, the average Indian attitude towards untouchables had not changed. This saree thus represented the dress of the untouchables and the poorest of the poor.

Mother bought three such sarees. This was the first time that the typical dress of an Indian woman was adopted as the dress of Catholic Sisters by any Order of the Christian religion for its mission in India.

On 17th August Mother Teresa came to Father Van Exem. Sister Superior Sanekal also came with Mother. When the elderly Father blessed the three sarees, Sister Sanekal wept bitterly. But Mother was quiet and composed. Father Van Exem of Belgium, Sister Superior Sanekal and Mother offered prayers. Mother had a few papers in her hand. These papers contained her future plans. In it she had noted that she wanted to serve the poor people of Kolkata. She had also noted that she would have an Indian dress like that of the poorest of the poor Indian. Father did not forget to bless these papers too.

Next day, on the evening of 18th August 1948, for the first time, Mother came out of the Loreto Convent Hostel wearing a saree. Her students and even her fellow Sisters could not recognize her. In comparison with the impressive and altogether different uniform of Loreto Convent, this white saree with blue border symbolized simplicity, humility and service of the poor.

In the hostel, Mother had taken only a few fellow Sisters into confidence about her plans. The surprised students were incredulous and were peeping from behind the doors and windows of their rooms. They could hardly recognize their teacher who was wearing a saree instead of the usual Loreto uniform. Overwhelmed, Subhashini Das followed Mother. It was getting dark in the evening. Subhashini Das bid farewell to Mother in that descending darkness. It was as if the enveloping darkness was folding away with itself Mother Teresa's entire foreignness- her dress, her language, her food habits and her views. Subhashini Das who bade farewell to Mother at that time was later to become her first disciple in the Missionaries of Charity.

Along with the Indian dress, all the other regulations regarding food and daily routine also reflected her determination to provide a totally Indian environment. Her normal meal consisted of rice, pulses, vegetables and yogurt. This is the meal that is prepared in Mother's Homes as well. But in donation, all dishes received are welcome whether they are Indian or Chinese or Continental or anything else.

In the traditional Indian style, the meals are eaten with bare hands, squatting on the floor. Today the number of Sisters in the Missionaries of Charity is in thousands. In spite of this all cleaning and washing of clothes is done manually and by beating them on the floor. The floor is also swept manually. Many times Mother would get household appliances as gifts from abroad but she would not allow these to be used in the Homes. Instead she sold them to use the money for food and medicines. Generally, she would politely decline the offers of gifts. She observed, "A poor person must first get food and medicine. We should not be using these devices of affluent societies in a poor country like India."

Today Sisters from all the countries work for the Missionaries of Charity. Women from Europe, America, Africa, Australia and

the Middle East and from all over the globe have become Sisters on account of their inner urge for service. Irrespective of the continent or the country where they are located, they are distinctly Indian in their dress, food habits and living style. Blue-eyed and fair complexioned Maria from Germany looks as Indian in a saree as a natural-born Indian like Sister Agnes.

There is yet another interesting aspect. Sisters may be from any part of the world- America, Italy, Japan or Spain- and irrespective of where they may be working in India or abroad, all of them are called Indian Sisters. Mother Teresa has taken India and Indianness to new heights of dignity in the world. India and Mother have become synonymous.

## ON THE WAY TO AIRPORT

This happened in March 1991. One morning Mother was in her small office at Nirmal Hriday. Having heard about her wonderful work, a few foreign tourists had come to meet her.

In the meantime a Sister came with Mother's clean but tattered and heavily patched bag. She was followed by another Sister who also carried an old and faded suitcase. Guessing that Mother was traveling, I enquired from Sister about Mother's programme and destination. The Sister responded, "First Delhi and then Mumbai." Sister was aware that I was always looking for opportunities to be with Mother. I sought Mother's permission to accompany her in the car to the airport. I was overjoyed when Mother consented with her winning smile. I would be able to spend the next 45 minutes undisturbed with Mother! I had many doubts and questions in my mind.

In the van of the Missionaries of Charity, on the front seat two persons can sit beside the driver. As Mother got into the seat I asked her, "Mother, can I sit with you today?"

After a brief pause Mother said, "OK. Come along." Her facial expression suggested as if she was saying, "You naughty---!" By nature she was humorous and would try to enliven even the depressing environment of poverty, sickness and death in her Homes.

It was my first experience to sit so close to Mother. Before this I had experienced only a fleeting touch of hers while seeing her off at the Manila airport. That had sent a sensation of holy shiver in my body.

On account of jerks in the moving van, the rosary and the cross in Mother's hand were repeatedly touching my hand. I intensely felt that I must live this moment fully. I felt a strange

strength within myself. I was reminded of stanzas from the Ramayana. There can be no joy greater than good company and that you get good company only by God's grace.

I asked Mother, "Why do you always sit on the front seat of the van?" Mother's simple response was, "It helps me to have a clear vision of the road and footpaths on both sides." She could then spot if there was any poor disabled, sick or dying person needing help. This indeed was the essence of Mother's mission!

I was always curious to know about the most potent influence on Mother life after Jesus. This is an opportune time, I said to myself. I asked her directly, "Mother! Apart from Jesus, who has most influenced your life?"

It appeared that Mother was ready for this question. She unhesitatingly and quickly said, "Gandhiji, among the people of my time", and then pointing her finger skyward, she added, "St. Francis of Assisi, among those who are up there."

I was not conversant with the saints and legends of Christianity. I was feeling awkward because of my ignorance. Mother could easily see that I knew nothing about Saint Francis of Assisi. She said, You ought to read about his life. He was a great saint and even before achieving his sainthood he was a great human being." With my hesitation now behind me, I nodded, "Mother! I will certainly read his biography and tell you about it."

Mother continued, "Mahatma Gandhi has done wonderful work. I regret that I could never meet him in his lifetime but I am deeply impressed by his efforts to uplift Harijans<sup>10</sup>. He was a saviour of the downtrodden and an angel for the untouchables.... a real Mahatma."

Suddenly, Mother asked the driver to stop the vehicle. The driver promptly stopped the van by the side of the road. Quickly, Mother got down and walked back some distance. The Sisters and I followed her. Soon we reached a family sitting on a torn sheet under the shade of a tree. The young man was vomiting. Two frightened and dirty children were sitting nearby. The woman was

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<sup>10</sup> Mahatma Gandhi had given this name to society's untouchables.

hurling abuses at him. "You bastard! You again got drunk last night! From your day's wage of 25 rupees, you could not spare enough to buy even one kilo of rice. Now how do I feed these children? With my flesh?".

Seeing us, the woman started weeping. Mother turned back. She did not ask that family any question nor did she say anything there. After everybody was again seated in the van, Mother told Sister Irene, "He appears to be an alcoholic. He is young and has got a family. He needs to be helped."

That was all she spoke. Sister knew what needed to be done. Mother wanted him to be helped in getting over his addiction. Thereafter, the young couple could on their own earn their living and look after their family. Therefore no other help was required.

I realized that day that Mother and Sisters very well understood the human psychology. They had to deal with innumerable persons like this couple every day. It was essential for them to assess as to who was really in need. And how much help, to what extent, and in what shape?

At the airport no one stopped Mother's van. Guards saluted her respectfully and officers were eager to be helpful.

Airlines, not only in India, but the world over vied with each other to have Mother on board. They all felt privileged to offer free first class travel to Mother. The cartons of medicines with her were never checked. There were no limitations on her excess baggage. The Staff of the airlines was similarly eager to handle her baggage.

During her air journey Mother never forgot to ask the airhostesses for the left over food items for her Homes. Apart from airlines, even big hotels and super markets also felt reassured that the surplus food items regularly sent by them to the Mother's Homes would be well utilized.

## **WHEN MOTHER OFFERED TO ACT AS AIR HOSTESS**

**I**t happened in March 1993. During my air travel from Manila to Delhi, I had some very interesting and inspiring experiences. In those days, there was no direct flight from Manila to Delhi. It involved travel from Manila to Hong Kong, and thereafter changing plane from Hong Kong to Delhi. At the Manila International airport, I could spot at some distance some Sisters in white sarees with blue border. On coming closer, I found that I had known all these Sisters for the past three years. On enquiry, I learned that all them were also going to Delhi. They were returning to India after completing their tenure at Manila. I was very happy to have a chance to fly with them.

The duration of the Manila-Hongkong flight was only 100 minutes. I changed my seat to sit in a vacant seat next to the Sisters. It gave me an opportunity to discuss with them the activities of Mother's Homes in Manila in some detail. During my visits to Mother's Homes, we had together shared the joys and sorrows at the Homes. It occurred to me that since the whole world was Mother's arena of activities and if these Sisters were to be relocated in some far-away country, we may never have a chance to meet again. Therefore for nearly two hours we were lost in reminiscing about old events and activities. Ordinarily, in the Homes it is difficult for Sisters to spare such a long time for conversation.

The flight from Hong Kong to Delhi took full five hours. As soon as we boarded the Air India flight, we were delighted to smell India in the air. There was the smell of Indian food and dishes, the grace of the Indian dress of the hostesses and the chatter in Indian languages, all enhanced by the decor of the replicas of the famous Ajanta and Ellora paintings on the aircraft walls.

After the aircraft took off, I found that in the 300-seater plane, the four Sisters were seated in the last row. My seat was

in the second row in business class. In order to again have the company of the Sisters, I requested the Captain of the flight to change my seat to the one in the last row next to the Sisters.

The Captain was surprised but nevertheless smiled and asked, "It is commonplace for us to receive requests for change to front seats but here you are asking to go from the front to the back. What is the mystery?" When I told him that my only purpose was to sit with Sisters, he was touched. He was well aware of Mother and her work. He said, "Please wait. I will come back shortly."

After a few minutes he came back beaming and very politely told me, "Today we have a number of seats vacant in the upper class. Instead of your going to the back seat, I will be happy to accommodate all the four Sisters with you in the business class."

It was an unusual sight inside the plane smoothly gliding in the air 33,000 feet above the ground. Four Sisters draped in their well-known blue-bordered white sarees, and each carrying an extensively used and tattered bag, were walking in a mini convoy from economy to business class. Passengers were intrigued and watching in amazement. They were wondering why all the Sisters were moving to the upper class cabin when in their imagination, the blue-bordered white cotton saree was associated with only service among poor people!

The Captain was very considerate. He had instructed the cabin staff to look after all of us well and make us comfortable. I spent all the five hours with the Sisters. I sat with Sisters Leon and Maria to my right and Sisters Lucia and Evelyn on my left. Sitting in the middle, I was busy finding replies to my odd reservations and misgivings about Missionaries of Charity.

Cold drinks had been served. Now hostesses were distributing very beautiful cosmetic pouches. For luxury class passengers, these pouches and their contents are of the best international brands, to suit the taste of the discerning passengers from different countries traveling in the plane.

The air hostess hesitated when she saw the four Sisters. She was in a dilemma. It was her duty to offer a pouch to each passenger but she was unsure and wondering whether it would be appropriate to offer French scent and other cosmetics to the Sisters.

She gave one pouch to me. For the other 4 pouches, she found a way out of her dilemma by placing them in the four seat pockets facing the Sisters.

After our meals were finished, the Sisters carefully collected the left over items of foodstuff, wrapping them in the paper and polythene bags that they obtained from the hostess. The Sisters also requested the air hostess for all the left over foodstuff in the pantry for putting it to good use in the Homes.

During my conversation with the Sisters, I heard many interesting, inspiring, touching and even some tragic tales. My esteem and admiration for the Sisters had increased immensely. There seemed to be no limit to their personal sacrifices in pursuit of their commitment to service.

All the Sisters were traveling on free tickets offered by Air India. Mother herself had an open invitation from all the airlines to travel free, but some of the airlines such as Air India also provided, from time to time, free travel for other Sisters as well.

The story of how Mother was allowed free air travel is also no less interesting. Mother had to make great efforts to get this facility. Sister Lucia narrated a fascinating incident about Mother Teresa that took place several years back. The gripping description and all the gestures of Sister while narrating it are still fresh in my mind.

The activities and field of operation of the Missionaries of Charity was expanding. New Homes were regularly being set up in India and abroad. Mother had to travel to different Homes. Sometimes, it was for collecting information and checking antecedents of prospective parents in adoption cases before handing over innocent children to them. Sometimes it would be for purely administrative reasons to keep the growing institution running smoothly. Within the country, Mother had to take to the more time consuming travel by train, as air travel was very expensive. Austerity oriented Mother was always uncomfortable in spending large amounts of money on her travel expenses. Her logic? The money could be better used for helping the sick and dying, and for their food and medicines.

Mother Teresa wrote to the Government of India to permit her, accompanied by one sister, to travel free in Air India flights. As usual the government machinery was slow to shed its inertia. There was no reply for a long time. Mother did not give up and kept on writing follow-up letters at regular intervals. But all to no avail!

In sheer desperation Mother wrote yet another letter suggesting that if permitted, during her travel she could act as an airhostess. This would enable her to pay for her fare through her labour. She argued that in that event, Air India would not lose any passenger seat and would not therefore incur any loss. And in the bargain, Mother would be able to travel free without incurring any expense on airfare. By her common sense, Mother had invented an ingenious solution.

Mother's numerous letters had failed to wake the concerned staff. But Mother's offer to act as an airhostess acted as the last straw on the camel's back! It woke them up from their slumber. Perhaps it touched some sensitive chord in their heart too. Finally a decision was made. Mother's request was at last accepted.

The news about Air India offering free travel to Mother Teresa soon spread to other airlines too. Almost all airlines flying the blue skies now eagerly looked forward to greeting on board Mother, clad in her blue bordered white saree. And they took pride in flying Mother free in their planes.

Thereafter, until her death all the airlines offered her free first class air travel. The airlines would also try to accommodate, as far as possible, other Sisters also on a complimentary basis. In addition, the cabin staff would never forget to pack the unused foodstuff for Mother's Homes.

We were now approaching Delhi. From the aircraft I could see the land of India. Little did I realize that five hours had flown by. My destination had arrived. I had to get down at Delhi. The Sisters had to catch an onward flight for Kolkata. It was time for an emotional leave taking.

While getting up from her seat, one Sister realized that the pouches meant for them were still lying in the seat pockets. She took them out and handed over all the four to me. She said with

a smile, "Normally we are at the receiving end. Today it is our turn to offer some little thing to you."

The Sisters, carrying cartons containing left over foodstuff, were now slowly proceeding towards the check-in counter of their destination, Kolkata, as I was walking towards the exit gate. It was time to finally wave good-bye!

## PYRAMIDS OF COCONUT SHELLS

Like all other metropolitan cities in developing countries, in Kolkata too hundreds of poor people, old and young, sleep on the footpath. Many of the children among them, particularly the disabled, start begging. Some children land in the clutches of criminals and are forced to become thieves and pickpockets. These street urchins were always a matter of deep concern for Mother.

Mother wanted to set up an ordinary night shelter for them. If they could be kept busy in some small productive jobs, they could be weaned away from begging and other undesirable activities. They also needed education. Their pitiable plight was extremely painful.

Once Mother was traveling in a tram. As the tram stopped and she was getting down, she saw two children quarreling with each other. They were fighting over a discarded and empty tender green coconut, locally known as 'Dab'. Mother was curious to know as to why they were fighting for one particular empty Dab while many other similar Dabs were lying around.

Mother put her question to the children. The children spoke in Bangla and the meaning of their reply was that in that particular Dab there was some water left. Perhaps, someone in a hurry had not consumed all the water. The two children were fighting over those few drops of sweet coconut water. Such is the depth of penury! Mother was deeply pained to hear their reply. It set her thinking.

Water from fresh green coconuts is a very popular and safe drink. People enjoy taking water from tender coconuts but then carelessly throw away the empty shells on the streets. Municipal staff has neither time nor inclination to remove them. Heaps of such Dabs keep on collecting on the streets.

The Dabs and the poverty of children kept haunting Mother's. An idea crossed her mind. There should be some way in which these children could be kept busy with the dry shells of Dabs. What use can be made of these dry shells? How to collect and store them?

Mother had an unflinching faith that whenever she needed something for a noble cause, God always helped her.

Some thing similar happened this time too. This is an incident from the year 1973. A large company, I.C.I., had purchased a large piece of land near Sealdah to set up their research laboratory. There was a large house also on that plot.

It was a matter of chance that until that time, the land was unutilized. When Mother made enquiries she came to know that perhaps the company no longer considered that site suitable for its research purpose. Mother saw a ray of hope. She immediately got in touch with officers of the company to be permitted to use the land but did not receive any favourable response.

Mother still did not lose hope. She persevered and requested them to expedite their decision. She would wait in the offices of the company for hours. She apprised them of her needs. Whether it was the magic of Mother's love or God's command but the company officials finally agreed to give her the entire land along with the house. The building had huge hall-like rooms, verandahs and open land.

Mother was delighted to have her wish fulfilled. The company finally decided not merely to permit the use of land but even donated that land and the house to Mother. Mother named it as 'Premdan'.<sup>11</sup> Even today this Mother's Home continues to be known as 'Premdan'. The first thing that comes to view as you enter 'Premdan' is a Rehabilitation Centre.

'Premdan' provides a night shelter for hundreds of local people and for those who have no place to rest and sleep, except on the footpaths and the side walks. The Home is also a source of livelihood for hundreds of orphans. One can see countless pyramids made

<sup>11</sup> Translated, it means a "Gift of love".

from discarded shells of tender coconuts at one end of this property in Sealdah. These empty coconut shells are collected from the streets of Sealdah, Howrah and other areas of metropolitan Kolkata. Each child makes his own pyramid.

There is no need to count the dry Dabs once they are arranged as a pyramid. Children are taught to make pyramids in such a manner that each pyramid will use only hundred Dabs, neither more nor less. The pyramid method is a very simple way of storing maximum number of Dabs in minimum space. Counting of Dabs is also simplified.

Upon collecting 100 Dabs, each child is given either a double bread weighing 500 grams or sixteen thick biscuits, according to his or her choice.

Every morning, each child staying in this night shelter Home is given a mug full of milk and four pieces of bread for breakfast. This is a gift from 'Premdan', irrespective of whether the child works or not. In addition, if a child collected 100 Dabs, he would be additionally assured of two full meals.

Twice every week, in the evening a van of Missionaries of Charity would take away these shells in pyramids. At times, some generous persons would provide big trucks to transport the Dabs. These Dabs are all transported to Premdan's second center at Tiljala. There every bit of the dry coconut such as its hard shell, its coconut fibre etc., are separated and used to make various handicraft items such as foot mats, stuffing for cushions, durries etc.

Mother encouraged the children to go around and collect as many dry coconut shells as possible. To constantly review her incentives for the children, she would keep a close watch on the maximum number of Dabs that one child could reasonably collect in a day.

What a beautiful drive it has turned out to be! It has contributed to the removal of garbage from the streets and reduction in the scavenging work of the city's Municipal Corporation. Most importantly, poor children get to earn while playfully building pyramids of Dabs. It also generates a spirit of healthy competition

rather than a quarrelsome temperament among them. Many such children no longer beg. They are saved from falling into the hands of criminal gangs or indulging in anti-social activities. They are finding a new ray of hope in their lives.

Mother's deep concern for the poor children and her pragmatic approach resulted in a remarkable productive use of Dab shells. It continues to spread joy in the lives of hundreds of poor street children.

## THE AILMENTS OF AFFLUENCE

Mother used to say it is easy to give happiness to the poor. It was also easy to give food to the hungry, water to the thirsty and medicine to the sick and ailing. According to her the most challenging problem, however, is to treat loneliness in the lives of people. The biggest affliction of the world today is the feeling, "I am not wanted by any one." Such loneliness slowly drains away the desire to live. Hurting even more than the physical pain, loneliness is an ailment that mostly afflicts the rich. The problem has assumed mammoth proportions in foreign countries.

Because of the fast pace of life in the affluent countries of Europe and America, nobody has time there to comfort and care for the old people. Mother used to call loneliness as the leprosy of the West. The problem has become acute even in some rich Asian countries where the houses are small and life has become too busy. Old people are neglected. Mother Teresa always held the view that the problem of loneliness is relatively less acute among poor people because they willingly share their joys and sorrows with each other. They have nothing to hide. Terms such as personal, confidential or private are alien to the lives of poor people. On the other hand, the rich are always scared of being robbed.

Mother Teresa also has her Homes in some of the affluent countries such as Hong Kong. I had quite a sobering experience when in April 1994 I visited one of Mother's Homes in Hong Kong. At that time Hong Kong was still a British colony. There was affluence all around. I had standing instructions from Mother to visit her Homes in whichever country I visited and look after the welfare of Sisters. I took a train from Chungking arcade in Kowloon and then took a taxi for Mother's Home.

In Hong Kong Mother's Home is situated in an area where land costs are astronomical. A kind-hearted Chinese had donated

this expensive piece of land to Mother for her Home. Hong Kong's prosperity was visible even in Mother's Home. There were separate rooms for men and women. Disabled and sick persons were in comfortable beds. They were also in wheel chairs or walking with stooping backs, with the support of walking sticks. But these people were not poor. They were rich. And yet they were miserable. They were hurt because they had been forgotten. Their own kith and kin had abandoned them and they were hoping against hope that a son or a daughter would come to visit them.

Because of the language barrier, I could mainly talk only to the Sisters. Most of the inmates did not know any language other than Chinese. They knew only a few English words to run their businesses. I was, however, very keen to interact with at least some of the inmates of the Home in this new country. Responding to my desire, a Sister told me that the lady in bed no. 3 knew English and I could converse with her. The seventy-year-old lady greeted me with a smile. She was wearing a Chinese dress but also wore a dazzling diamond pin in her nose. Seeing an Indian nose pin on a Chinese woman, I felt instant affinity with her. She could speak fluent English. I had an intimate conversation with her for about two hours.

"Your name?"

"Sara.... Sara..."

"You are wearing an Indian ornament in your nose?"

"My husband had business association with an Indian partner. I was friends with the women folk of his family and saw them and other Indian ladies wearing this ornament. It looked pretty on them. I too liked it and adopted it."

"You seem to be well off. Then why are you here in Mother Teresa's Home?" She liked the attention she got. She also seemed to welcome an opportunity to share her story and pain. She unfolded her life's story like a reel of film. "Yes I have got money, a house and a business. I have got sons and daughters-in-law and daughters and sons-in-law. I have got four lovely grand children. Till my husband was alive, all of us lived together. But everything changed after my husband's death. I felt terribly lonely. My sons

and daughters along with their spouses would go out to work in the morning and return only in the evening. The children were admitted to boarding schools. Even when they were home, they remained busy with their own preoccupations. Often they would not have time to say even 'Hello' to me. They would also snub me if I took the initiative and spoke to them. In my own home I was now terrified of offering my mouth and had to keep to myself! All this caused me deep distress."

She continued, "As time passed, things got worse. When my younger son got married, I was asked to vacate my room for him. I was shifted to a small cabin where I had to sleep with my pet dog. It was a 5' x 4' wooden cabin with one regular and one bunk bed. Earlier, a Filipino maid and the dog used to sleep there. Now the maid was discharged on account of paucity of space. I developed allergy from the dog's hair and had to give it away to a friend of mine. But this left me absolutely alone. Sometimes the loneliness was unbearable and very hurtful. No one seemed to need me. I felt as if I had no place in this whole world. I felt guilty as if I was a burden for all. I was absolutely unwanted and no one liked me."

She took a brief pause and looked at me. When she was convinced that I was intently listening to her story, she started again. "I had been to Mother's Home. A rich cousin sister of mine used to live there and I used to visit her. Despised and rebuffed by her children and compelled by her sickness and old age, my sister was forced to come to this Home of Mother Teresa. I learned that after her death she bequeathed all she had to Mother Teresa.

"I did not want to leave my own home. When all of them would go out, they would lock me inside the house. I got desperate. I was extremely weak and could not walk without assistance. One morning as they were leaving I came out crawling and begged that I should not be locked in. But they had all become insensitive and would not care for my entreaties. They locked the house and left leaving me alone there, outside the house. I was ashamed to face the prying glances of people in the adjacent flats. I had been publicly insulted. I wept bitterly and became unconscious. Some kind person rang up Mother's Home.

"Considering my pathetic and hapless condition I was accepted in the Home. Here one does not feel lonely. There is always

someone to talk to. Here the people may be poor, destitute, old and disabled but all live, laugh and pray together. Here I have received abundant love and found peace. I intend to donate all that I possess to this Home." She felt quite unburdened as if she had shed a big load off her mind.

"Did your children not stop you or take you back?" I asked her.

Sara wept. She said, "This is actually what still rankles most. I would have never gone back but they did not even ask me. Not even once. Nobody even pretended to say- Mother, come back." She was uncontrollably sobbing, with tears rolling down her cheeks.

The Sisters informed me that besides keeping them as inmates, looking after lonely old, sick and disabled persons even at their own homes was also a significant part of their daily work. When they hear Sister's affectionate 'Hello', the lonely souls brighten up and are happy.

Sister then narrated a heart-rending event. "In the crowded area of Kowloon, a Japanese origin couple lived in a flat in a large building of 200 flats. In the busy life of Hongkong, time is considered to be money. No one has the time or inclination to think of others. People in the same building or even on the same floor do not know each other. Outside this couple's flat, a large heap of newspapers had collected. Delivered bottles of milk and several packets of bread were piling up. The flat was locked from inside. None of the neighbours had time to worry or think about the pile up. I grew apprehensive. We were two Sisters and we took courage and got the lock removed. When we entered the flat, we were shocked to find both of them dead. There was a telephone diary near the bed. After making telephone calls to several numbers listed in that diary, we could finally locate the son of that couple and speak to him. We left that place only after the family members had arrived. Later it was learnt that they had both committed suicide. Before death they wrote a note in their own hands, "We cannot look after ourselves and now have no desire left to live. We are afraid if either of us dies first, there would be no one to take care of the other. Therefore we are both taking our own lives together, of our own accord." They had entrusted their flat to Hong Kong Bank to sell it by auction. They instructed that half of

the amount may be given to the children and the balance may be given to the Missionaries of Charity. All the articles in the flat were also donated to Mother's Home.

In a sad tone, Sister added, "We sometimes feel guilty. They were keen to shift to Mother's Home but we could not take them. Instead other persons who were more needy were taken in. You know, because of constraints of space we cannot accommodate all and can take only a limited few as inmates. May God bestow peace to their souls."

## AN INVALUABLE GIFT

Mother had come to open a new Home. I could meet her for only ten minutes outside the church in the Tayuman home. Mother was very busy. Without much explanation of the background or purpose, she said, "Ms. Mehta and you must go to Olongapo." I was surprised because I knew nothing about the place. I said, "Mother! What are we supposed to do there? We have never been to that place earlier."

Mother's reply was, "You just go there and you will discover for yourself." By coincidence, the next day was a Saturday. Saturday and Sunday were non-working days for my husband. Complying with Mother's wishes, on Saturday morning itself, my husband and I accompanied by a friend of ours and his wife left for Olongapo. We reached Olongapo after a three-hour drive in our car. It is a port town on the Subic Bay. It is a very large and beautiful natural port of the Philippines, which until a few years back was an American naval base, also known as the Subic Naval Base. This port city is famous for its white sand beaches.

We headed straight for Mother's Home. As soon as we reached there we heard the cries of infants. One of the Sisters met us at the entrance. She was holding a six-month old infant in her arms. She was ready to take the sick child to a hospital. In the courtyard inside we saw a number of young girls, looking forlorn or weak who were either pregnant or had infants in their arms. This was the Mother's Home for unwed mothers. They were all young girls in the age group of 14 to 30 years.

Mother Teresa had started this Home after the U.S. naval base had closed and soldiers had stopped coming to this place. There was an atmosphere of despondency in this beautiful port city. After the closure of the naval base, the tourism industry had collapsed leading to widespread unemployment and poverty. There was no large industry. The small-scale units too had fallen on bad

times as there were no buyers of their products. Exports had come down. Along with the economic problems was the even bigger psychological problem of young girls who were earlier working in nightclubs frequented by the sailors. Many of them had become unwed mothers due to their friendship and physical intimacy with the sailors. They had got used to the glamorous life of nightclubs, the dancing and singing and the easy money. Now they were not equipped to cope with the difficult economic environment and stark unemployment.

No doubt, the girls had chosen to work in the bars and nightclubs in the prime of their youth on their own volition. It is remarkable that the Philippines is one of the few countries in the Asian continent where incidents of rape or molestation of women are very rare. Young men and women mix freely. Women are quite liberated and society does not ostracize or look down upon unwed mothers or pregnant girls. Also, the tradition of extended families provides them with protection and support. In the country, education up to High School is compulsory. When they come out of schools, many of these young girls are dazzled by the glittering and flashy atmosphere of nightclubs and bars frequented by foreign sailors. They find the work of dancing and singing girls or massage girls attractive and entertaining. The girls came into this field out of their own desire to earn quick money. Some also take to prostitution but no one is forced.

Mother's home at Olongapo was quite spacious. In one large hall pregnant women were accommodated. In the other hall mothers with new-born infants were kept. In the third room there were about fifty infants sleeping in cribs. Out of sheer economic necessity, after a mere 7 days after delivery of the baby, the mothers went out to work leaving their babies in the Home. At mid-day they would come back for a short while to feed the babies and then go back to work. The entire responsibility of looking after the children devolved upon the Sisters. The arrangements for the provision of a shelter for mothers, care for their children and arrangements for food were generally satisfactory. Mother's Home had saved many lives by giving them shelter. The main problem however was the rehabilitation of these unwed mothers in the society.

At the Olongapo Home, we saw one American youth, Samson, briskly working as carpenter. He was a catholic missionary.

He was pained by and extremely resentful of his fellow countrymen who had exploited these young girls. Samson was of the strong view that the husbands of these girls and the fathers of these children should not have abandoned the mothers and the children. They should have discharged their moral and social responsibility by taking them with them.

A number of children could be provided with foster homes. In fact 27 mothers living in the Home had agreed to give their children for adoption. As per the rules of the Home, they could not stay there indefinitely. It was also not possible for these mothers to look after the infants and simultaneously work as well. But the girls had to steel their hearts for such a tough decision because many of them would never ever see their babies again.

We could now begin to appreciate why Mother had sent us both here. On our return, I briefed Mother about our visit to Olongapo. I also told her that some young girls wanted economic assistance to stand on their own feet. "Yes. This indeed was the reason why I wanted you and your husband to go and learn for yourselves" Mother said. I was happy to inform Mother that we had already arranged for training for these girls in embroidery etc., so that they could earn their livelihood and be on their own. We had also contributed some funds to provide financial assistance to them in opening small roadside coffee shops and restaurants for earning a livelihood. I also told her, "Mother, there were a number of them also wanting assistance for poultry farming, piggery etc. But we find it extremely difficult to associate in such small-scale industries that involve breeding of living creatures for ultimate killing. You know we are Jains and vegetarians. We have no interest at all in these non-vegetarian trades. If you like, you may entrust some one else with this."

Mother said, "I understand" and smiled. She then raised her hand towards both of us and softly said, "God bless you!" That day in a surprise move, she took out a pendant from her bag. This metallic pendant had the figure of Jesus engraved on one side while the other side had the figure of Mother Mary with a lovely child. Mother put that pendant in her mouth and then took it out, wiped it and gave it to me. This was her second pendant gifted to me. I was overwhelmed with joy. I still have with me this invaluable gift of Mother.

## **THE NOBEL PRIZE AND THE AGONY OF PRIZES**

**F**or several years a feeling was gaining ground among the intelligentsia that the persons selected for the Nobel Peace Prize were not true messengers of Peace in the real sense of the term. They were of the view that the tradition to honour people of the likes of Martin Luther King (Jr.) or Albert Schwitzer who were living examples of peace, humanism and service needed to be restored. The selection of Mother Teresa for the award of a Nobel Peace prize in 1979 was widely hailed as a reversal of the earlier trend and recognition that politics was not the only way to contribute to efforts to bring about world peace. Mother's work was something unique. Her selection was universally hailed and yet, with great humility, Mother in her first reaction said that she did not deserve it. By her selection it was more the Nobel Prize, and not Mother, that had grown in stature.

Until then, Mother was only the third Indian after Dr. Rabindra Nath Tagore for Literature (in 1913) and Dr. C.V. Raman for Physics (in 1930) to receive a Nobel prize.

Mother was not inclined to go to Oslo to accept the prize. When other senior Sisters of Missionaries of Charity reasoned with Mother in favour of going to receive the prize, she said, "These activities with a lot of fanfare create deep pain in my heart." Then as if to seek divine guidance, she prayed in the Chapel. As she came out of the Chapel, she had made up her mind. She said, "Please inform the organizers that I will accept the prize in the name of the poor."

On 9 December 1979 Mother arrived at Oslo in Norway to accept the highest award of the world. On 10 December, a glittering function was organized at the Oslo University, the traditional site for the award. The King of Norway, many celebrities, famous

literary personalities of world renown, diplomats and senior officials of the Nobel Foundation were present. A galaxy of prominent citizens of the world, attired in formal dresses, was seated in their assigned seats. In the midst of all this pomp and pageantry, Mother Teresa came in her usual distinctive but ordinary white saree with blue border. As the frail and slightly stooping Mother started ascending the steps of the podium to receive the Prize, the whole hall burst into a thunderous applause and sustained clapping. It was a spontaneous cheering by every one of the 800 persons present there. The function commenced with a prayer very dear to Mother. It was a prayer for peace of St. Francis of Assisi. At the request of Mother everyone present joined in singing the prayer. It was an unparalleled scene for a Nobel Prize award ceremony.

After the prayer, the Chairman of the Nobel Committee of Norway Professor John Sannes made a brief but moving speech. He highlighted the respect for the individual and his dignity in Mother's work. He emphasized this aspect of her work by quoting the then President of the World Bank, Robert McNamara who had said that, "Mother Teresa really richly deserved this prize because she promoted peace in the most fundamental manner by her efforts to protect the sanctity and human dignity of millions of poor and deprived people in the lowest strata of the society."

As part of the Nobel Foundation's tradition, a grand banquet was to be arranged as part of the award ceremony. When Mother was informed of the programme in advance, she immediately made an unprecedented demand. Mother requested the organizers, "If we dispense with this banquet, I could utilize the money thus saved to provide food to the poor, those who need it most." Protocol conscious officials of the organizers threw aside all conventions and regulations in the grand award ceremony and very gladly accepted Mother's request.

As a consequence, a substantial amount running into thousands of pounds was saved for providing food for needy people. The news of the Mother's unusual request and the departure by the tradition-bound Nobel Committee soon spread all over the world through newspapers and television channels. A live coverage of the function was also telecast all over the world. People all around the globe were touched by Mother's gesture. Money from different

countries started pouring in for the Mother's poor. Even small school children were so overwhelmed by emotion by this noble gesture on the part of Mother that many of them even donated their pocket money for her cause.

As a result of this outpouring of emotion and oneness with Mother's compassion, large donations amounting to as much as about half the grand prize money were received by Mother. It was as if a spontaneous wave of compassion touching almost every one had swept the entire world.

Mother Teresa did not go to any university to do a Ph.D. But the best universities of the world were keen to confer their doctoral degrees on her. These included some of the world's most prestigious universities such as the Vishwa Bharati University at Shanti Niketan in India, Harvard University in USA, Cambridge University in UK etc. Mother who was made a doctor of subjects as diverse as divinity, humane letters, law and economics often joked, "I have developed a stoop in carrying the heavy burden of these degrees!" Many of the prominent cities such as New York, San Francisco, Miami etc. have also honoured her by presenting the Keys of their Cities to Mother.

Universities, governments, social institutions, magazines etc., were all eager to honour Mother. Once, an American magazine 'Good House Keeping', devoted to fashion and housekeeping, printed Mother's picture on its cover page. Every year, the magazine used to carry out an extensive survey to select the most admired and popular woman in the whole world. It would then honour the selected woman by carrying her picture on its cover page. In the past, well known personalities or fashion icons of the time such as Queen Elizabeth, Princess Diana, Grace Kelly, Madonna and Jackie Kennedy had adorned the cover page of the magazine. Even with her simple features and wrinkled face and most ordinary looking dress, Mother had now joined this galaxy of beautiful and famous women on the cover page of a magazine of the privileged. What a contrast it was! The price of the single copy of the elitist magazine was possibly much higher than the cost of Mother's simple dress of her usual white cotton saree in which she was featured on the cover page!

Mother was a recipient of many other prizes before and after the Nobel Prize. In 1962, she was given the Ramon Magsaysay Award, known as Asia's equivalent of the Nobel Prize. In January 1971, she was awarded by Pope Paul VI, the Pope John XXIII Peace Award. In the same year she was given the Good Samaritan Award in New York. She also received the Joseph Kennedy Jr. Foundation Award in Washington D.C. in the presence of the entire Kennedy family. The large sums of the award money in thousands of dollars that came with this award were utilized for the treatment of mentally retarded children of Mother Teresa's Home at Dum Dum in Kolkata that was named as Nirmal Kennedy Centre. A little later, the University of San Diego honoured her by conferring upon her the honorary degree of Doctor of Humane Letters.

In 1972 she was honoured with the Jawahar Lal Nehru Peace Award for International Understanding. In 1973 she was decorated with the Templeton Foundation Prize for Progress in Religion. In 1975 at the conference of the International Year of Women at Mexico, she was invited to participate as a special guest from India. In the same year she was awarded the Albert Schweitzer International Prize. Soon after she got the Nobel Prize in 1979. 'Bharat Ratna'<sup>12</sup> the highest civilian award of India was conferred upon her in 1980. On 24 November 1983, she received from Queen Elizabeth the exclusive award of the 'Order of Merit' that has been conferred only on three other non-Britons of the eminence of Dr. Albert Schwietzer, Dwight D. Eisenhower former US President and Dr. Sarvapalli Radhakrishnan, former President of India.

In 1987, at the Tayuman Home in Manila I talked to Mother about the plethora of awards that had been conferred upon her and whether she considered them as matters of celebration. After a brief silence, her response was, "I accept these for the glory of God and in the name of the poor. You know this publicity is also a kind of humiliation. It is some form of exploitation. The associated pomp, pageantry and fanfare are agonizing for me." She continued, "This is a pain that I suffer again and again, but in the name of the poor' I remember Jesus and endure all this." Mother had a great sense of humour and sensing that our discussion had made

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<sup>12</sup> Means 'Jewel of India'.

the atmosphere grim and glum, she tried to lighten it and said, "You know the good thing is that I get lots of money through these awards! The Home at Agra could be set up with the money that came with the Magsaysay Award. It would have been difficult otherwise." And then she turned and got busy in her normal routine as if nothing had happened.

## MOTHER - AN APOSTLE OF PEACE

In 1990, war appeared imminent between America and Iraq. The whole world had grave unease about the looming prospect of death, devastation and destruction following a dangerous war between two countries.

Mother Teresa always kept aloof from politics. But like any person concerned with the welfare of people at large, she was troubled by the turmoil and tensions in the world. Mother was very much worried about the dangerous fallout if hostility between Iraq and United States were to transform itself into a shooting war. She prayed alone in the Chapel. Thereafter she offered collective prayers with hundreds of Sisters. She prayed with the countless sick and poor of her Homes. All these prayers to god were to save the world from the horrors of yet another devastating war.

In her efforts to prevent a war, in January 1991, she sent a letter jointly addressed to President George Bush (Sr.) of USA and President Saddam Hussein of Iraq. In her sincere appeal voicing her deep anguish, she began by saying, "I come to you with tears in my eyes and God's love in my heart to plead to you for the poor and those who will become poor if the war that we all dread and fear happens. I beg you with my whole heart to work for, to labour for, God's peace and to be reconciled with one another."

Mother knew that both were mighty enough to destroy in few hours this beautiful world created by God along with the human beings who live in it. It would be a war that they would never be able to justify. They had not asked their countrymen if they were ready for war. Possibly, only a handful of strategists were taking the catastrophic decision about the life and death of a vast humanity. Was this justified?

She reasoned: "You both have your cases to make and your people to care for but first please listen to the One who came into

the world to teach us peace. You have the power and the strength to destroy God's presence and image, His men, His women, and His children. Please listen to the will of God. God has created us to be loved by His love and not to be destroyed by our hatred."

Mother was also acutely aware that when two countries fight a war, it was inevitable that one wins and the other loses. It was also possible that there would be a treaty before the war came to an end. But by that time genocide on a large scale would have taken place. Dead bodies of soldiers killed in the war would be already piled up. Lots of civilian and military persons would be physically and mentally maimed and incapacitated. Mother therefore continued her impassioned appeal.

"In the short term there may be winners and losers in this war that we all dread but that never can justify the suffering, pain and loss of life which your weapons will cause."

"I come to you in the name of God, the God that we all love and share, to beg for the innocent ones, our poor of the world and those who will become poor because of war. They are the ones who will suffer most because they have no means of escape. I plead on bended knees for them. They will suffer and when they do we will be the ones who are guilty for not having done all in our power to protect and love them. I plead to you for those who will be left orphaned, widowed, and left alone because their parents, husbands, brothers and children have been killed. I beg you please save them. I plead for those who will be left with disability and disfigurement. They are God's children. I plead for those who will be left with no home, no food and no love. Please think of them as being your children."

Mother had intrinsic faith in God. She firmly believed that Jesus had said - I am hungry give me food, I am thirsty give me water, I am suffering, give me love. Mother never tired of saying that she saw reflections of Jesus in all these disabled, sick and suffering people. When she served them, she felt as if she was touching Jesus. She would say she did not know who was responsible for the pain, suffering and hunger of these people. But the war would also plunge the healthy and cheerful persons in the sea of pain and suffering. "In that case war alone would be responsible for all their avoidable sorrows."

In her appeal she continued, "Finally I plead for those who will have the most precious thing that God can give us, Life, taken away from them. I beg you to save our brothers and sisters, yours and ours, because they are given to us by God to love and to cherish. It is not for us to destroy what God has given to us. Please, please let your mind and your will become the mind and will of God. You have the power to bring war into the world or to build peace. PLEASE CHOOSE THE WAY OF PEACE."

What was deeply agitating Mother's mind was that the world would forget momentary victory or defeat but the devastation, destruction, exploitation, unemployment and hunger caused by the war would continue to afflict the new generations for decades to come. Apart from this, a passion for seeking revenge would survive the war and have the potential of exploding at some later time into another round of hostilities and war. Love and hatred both are like contagious diseases. But war can only stoke the fires of hatred.

She therefore continued emotionally, "I, my sisters and our poor are praying for you so much. The whole world is praying that you will open your hearts in love to God. You may win the war but what will the cost be on people who are broken, disabled and lost?

"I appeal to you - to your love, your love of God and your fellowmen. In the name of God and in the name of those you will make poor do not destroy life and peace. Let love and peace triumph and let your name be remembered for the good you have done, the joy you have spread and the love you have shared."

She ended her impassioned appeal requesting both Presidents Bush and Hussein to pray. "Please pray for me and my sisters as we try to love and serve the poor because they belong to God and are loved in His eyes so we and our poor are praying for you. We pray that you will love and nourish what God has so lovingly entrusted into your care.

May Good bless you now and always."

Eventually Mother Teresa's appeal did not succeed in staving off the war. War did take place. As a result thousands of people were dead, wounded and maimed. However, after the war, in a

gesture of compassion the Health Minister of Iraq invited Mother Teresa and her associate Sisters to come to Iraq. Mother responded promptly and positively. Accompanied by her Sisters, she went to Iraq to nurse the sick and disabled and to take care of the orphan children.

## **GANDHIJI AND MOTHER - CHAMPIONS OF COMPASSION**

**T**he favourite prayer song of Mahatma Gandhi was ‘Vaishnav jan to tene kahiye je peer parayee jane re’. Literally translated, it means, “You can claim to call yourself a Vaishnav<sup>13</sup> (a compassionate person) only if you are in a position to feel the pain of others”. This prayer song epitomized Mahatma Gandhi’s entire life. Compassion was the essence of his life in that the pain of others hurt him as much as his own pain. Mother Teresa also had the same compassion and served the others because their pain and suffering pained her heart.

Gandhiji was assassinated in 1948 very soon after Mother had started her humanitarian work. Gandhiji and Mother never met each other but had mutual admiration and deep appreciation for the work and views of each other. Both had felt the pain of the poor. They had identified themselves with the poorest of the poor by a life of renunciation and living and working among them. Gandhiji would often stay in the ‘Harijan’ colonies i.e., the settlements housing the downtrodden and the ‘untouchables’ and worked tirelessly for the abolition of untouchability practiced by the upper caste society against the lower castes. Mother too led a simple life and chose to work and live among the sick, dying and the destitute. The fourth vow of her Order was to serve the poorest of the poor. Gandhiji believed in human service without any barriers of religion, caste or colour. Mother similarly believed that the highest religion was to provide relief from pain to all human beings.

Gandhiji was deeply impressed by Mother Teresa’s work among the people neglected by society such as the abandoned, the poor, the dying and the disabled. On her part, as an expression of her great appreciation and admiration for Gandhiji’s work for

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<sup>13</sup> A sect among Hindus who are strict vegetarians who are compassionate and abhor any form of killing.

the uplift of the downtrodden and his crusade to eliminate the abhorrent practice of untouchability, Mother even named the Leprosy Home set up by her as 'Gandhi Prem Niwas.' Gandhi's death anniversary is now nationally observed as a 'Leprosy Eradication Day.'

Mother was very fond of the prayer of Saint Francis Assisi. It was a prayer that was prayed every day at her Homes after the Holy Communion because, as Mother said, 'it was very fitting for each one of us'. When Gandhi first came across this prayer, he remarked, "Yeh to vaishnav jan ki peer parayee hi hai." Translated, the observation meant, "Oh, how wonderful! It is the same as 'Vaishnav jan ..... peer parayee jane re' (Gandhi's own favourite prayer)". Both Mother and Gandhi immensely liked the prayer reproduced below that fully exemplifies the similarities in their philosophies of life.

Let us all pray together:

Make us worthy, Lord, to serve our fellow men throughout the world who live and die in poverty and hunger.

Give them, through our hands, this day their daily bread; and by our understanding love, give peace and Joy.

Lord, make me a channel of Thy peace, that,  
where there is hatred, I may bring love;  
where there is wrong, I may bring the spirit of  
forgiveness;

where there is discord, I may bring harmony;  
where there is error, I may bring truth;  
where there is doubt, I may bring faith;  
where there is despair, I may bring hope;  
where there are shadows, I may bring light;  
where there is sadness, I may bring joy.

Lord, grant that I may seek rather to comfort than to be comforted;

to understand than to be understood;  
to love than to be loved;  
for it is by forgetting self that one finds;  
it is by forgiving that one is forgiven;  
it is by dying that one awakens to eternal life.

Amen.

## A LIFE OF DEDICATION

**W**hen we see Sisters performing functions which are ordinarily considered to be detestable and dirty such as washing human faeces and vomits or dressing stinking and gruesome wounds, or caring and comforting a leprosy patient, a natural question arises, "Why do they do it?" No monetary incentive can ever match up to the sacrifices. What is it that motivates them to happily keep going for a lifetime in this kind of work? Why do they sever their ties with family and relations and enter a life of renunciation?

There is no pressure from any quarter on the Sisters to join the Order of the Missionaries of Charity. They are also well aware that life in the Order is highly demanding. They have to lead a well-regulated and disciplined life of chastity. Until the time of their final initiation, they have to undergo rigorous training, and from time to time they have to pass tough examinations as well. Throughout their lives, they have to follow an arduous daily routine that is strictly governed by the Order's conduct rules and regulations. How are their lives regulated?

"Missionaries of Charities" has its own constitution. Rules and regulations of the constitution are strictly enforced. Certain qualifications are essential to become a Sister. The foremost requisite is that the volunteer offering to become a Sister has an intense heartfelt and burning desire to take to a life-long career of service. The desire should not be forced or contrived but must come as an inner call from one's heart. The person while selecting this life as a vocation should be clear in her mind that this is compatible with her ultimate aim and goal in life. The volunteer has to have a pure heart and noble objectives. The minimum age for entering the Order is eighteen years. Those who are younger have to wait.

The volunteers should have sound health and be capable to withstand the rigour and physical hardship of service activities.

They should also possess a healthy mind. They are expected to have general knowledge about the local area and the language of the place in which they are initially expected to work. Sisters are expected to be always neat and organized. Perhaps, one of the most important attributes looked for is a cheerful and sweet temperament. They are expected to have abundant commonsense and also be alert and vigilant about the environment around them. They need to be quick witted and able to take decisions independently. This attribute is particularly important in certain situations where it is not possible to contact or obtain guidance from the Sisters Superior.

After initial check for all these attributes, the novices are given their new names. They have the choice to adopt the name of any saint or any former Sister. This signifies a severance of all links with their past lives and their entry into a new life and the religious Order. This is their new identity, after renouncing their old lives. A Sister addresses her fellow nuns as Sister.

The Sisters have to take four vows, the vows of chastity, of obedience, of poverty and the Order's unique and the most important fourth vow to serve only the poorest of the poor. Before taking the final fourth vow they have to pass through many stages of a six year training. The first period of training of about six months to year is called 'Aspirancy'. Thereafter according to needs of each case, a training period of one or more years is called 'Postulancy'. A 2-year training full of hard physical labour follows this. The Sisters are also imparted a comprehensive knowledge of 'first aid'. During this stage of training, Sisters are known as 'novitiates'. In this period they are given white uniforms, including white sarees, but as yet without their distinctive blue border. For one year, they have to also study and acquire complete knowledge of the Constitution of the Missionaries of Charity. Before taking their final and fourth vow, the Sisters are allowed to go home for a few weeks that gives them a last opportunity to review their decision to enter the Order and make up their minds whether they wish to continue in this life of renunciation and dedication.

The Sisters are entitled to get their final uniform only after taking their fourth vow. It consists of the same thick white cotton saree, but with the addition of a distinctive blue border. This is to

be worn on a white petticoat. The style of wearing of the saree has to be such that it covers the head fully and even the forehead partially. The blouses too are of white cotton with full sleeves that have to be buttoned up to the neck. In winter, blue sweaters and black shawls are provided. On the saree, around the waist a string made of jute rope is tied for suspending a rosary and a crucifix. Footwear provided consists of chappals. Shoes with socks are provided only in cold countries. Similarly, woollen clothing is provided depending on the requirements of the specific place or climate. The Sisters must own only three sets of dresses, which must be darned and patched before they can be replaced.

Foremost among the Sisters' activities is to provide love, care and comfort to the unloved and abandoned, the poor, the sick and the dying. Under this rule even rich persons suffering from loneliness need to be comforted, loved and cared for. Helping the loitering neglected street children in the poor localities and educating them is an important part of the Order's service activities. Another essential item of the Sisters' regular routine is to look after sick beggars lying on the street walks. Where necessary, they are brought to 'Nirmal Hriday' or other similar Homes for care and comfort. Similarly, Missionaries of Charity takes pride in nursing and serving the lepers and to admit them in 'Gandhiji Prem Niwas.'

In all these activities, the Sisters have to strictly observe the Order's rules. One of these is a rule that prohibits them from accepting any food or drink outside the Homes and each Sister must carry her own water. Sisters are strictly forbidden to personally use anything donated for the Homes or the inmates or ask for anything for their personal use. Even the food items donated for the Homes will never be touched by the Sisters unless the donor has made an explicit request that it is for their use also. Another rule is that Sisters must travel as the poor do - walk or if the distance is far, use public transport.

Sisters are not encouraged to keep in touch with their families and are allowed to return home only on rare occasions such as the death of a parent or before an assignment to a distant foreign country.

Irrespective of their religion or faith, people are encouraged to love the god of their own belief. Mother had a strong belief in

God. It is an important part of Sisters training and duty to inspire people to pray to God. The Sisters are trained to give the dying inmates whatever they ask for according to their faith. Some ask for Ganges water, some ask for Holy Water and some others for a prayer. Some others just want someone to sit with them.

After completion of training and taking their final oath, Sisters are assigned duties in different Homes. The Homes have been given very beautiful and appropriate names. For example, the Home for the disabled and orphan children is called 'Shishu Bhawan' or Children's Home. The Home for very sick and dying persons is called 'Nirmal Hriday' or Pure Heart. Leprosy homes are called 'Gandhiji Prem Niwas' and 'Prem Dan', or Gift of Love.

A typical day in the life of Sisters involves the following activities.

- |                         |   |
|-------------------------|---|
| 4.40 to 4.45 A.M.       | - Wake Up   |
| 5.00 A.M.               | - Meditation and Prayer   |
| 6.00 A.M.               | - Attending 'Holy Mass' in the Chapel   |
| 6.45 A.M.               | - Breakfast   |
| 7.15 A.M.               | - Laundry, floor scrubbing and washing and household work   |
| 8.00 A.M. to 12.00 Noon | - Outdoor work such as going around the poor localities to look and care for destitute and abandoned persons, running mobile dispensaries in poor localities and attending to such other jobs as are assigned, in different Homes |
| 12.15 to 12.30 P.M.     | - Sisters return to their base Homes  |
| 12.30 P.M.              | - Lunch   |
| 1.15 P.M.               | - Brief Prayer  |
| 1.30 to 2.00 P.M.       | - Time for short rest   |
| 2.00 P.M. to 2.30 P.M.  | - Religious study (According to choice)   |

- |                        |  |
|------------------------|--|
| 2.30 P.M. to 6.00 P.M. | - Service activities according to the directions of the Sister Superior  |
| 6.00 to 6.15 P.M.      | - Coming back to base Home   |
| 6.15 P.M.              | - Collective prayer in Chapel  |
| 6.30 to 7.30 P.M.      | - Personal Prayer and contemplation time   |
| 7.30 P.M.              | - Dinner   |
| 8.00 P.M. to 8.30 P.M. | - Relaxation. Sisters are free to do as they please and also attend to their personal work   |
| 8.30 to 9.00 P.M.      | - Recreation and sports. In sports, Mother's favourite game was Tug-of-war   |
| 9 to 9.15 P.M.         | - Collective night prayers in Chapel   |
| 10.00 P.M.             | - Time to go to bed. Depending on its size, each hall accommodates 2 to 4 or sometimes even more Sisters.<br>- On Thursdays and Sundays, there are minor changes in prayer timings |

It is a life of total renunciation and dedication that is very tough and demanding in both physical and psychological terms.

Why then do the Sisters leave their comfortable and often affluent lives with their own loved ones to gladly embrace such an exacting vocation among the poor, sick and dying persons? Why don't they leave the Order when they have full liberty to leave it at any time? The experience so far is that only a minuscule of less than one per cent of the Sisters has left the Order.

There is only one possible answer. It is only a strong inner commitment to a life of service and love for the uncared and the unwanted that motivates them to choose and stay wedded to such a life. Only that can give them strength and satisfaction in carrying out their daily, monotonously drab and repetitive routine!

## **PREMONITION OF DEATH**

**M**any close associates, workers, well wishers and physicians of Mother felt that she had a premonition of her death. There were several occasions when Mother tried to give indirect hints about it. But sincere well-wishers even though they understood the import, disregarded such displeasing hints.

In the couple of years preceding her death, Mother had repeatedly suggested that she be relieved from the position of the Chief of the Missionaries of Charity. The main reason was her deteriorating health. However, even the Sisters very close to Mother were not prepared to face reality or think of a Missionaries of Charity without Mother!

But in March 1997, Mother was finally forced to announce her decision to step down. She said "I couldn't wait any longer. There is very little time left." On 13 March 1997 Mother's decision to resign from the post of the Chief of Missionaries of Charity was already public and was soon known the world over. Within less than six months, Mother left for her heavenly abode.

Dr. A.K. Bardhan, personal physician and close friend of Mother, recounts the most credible evidence of Mother's premonition of her death . He believes that Mother not only had a premonition of her death but that she also had an idea of the time of her death.

In September 1996, Mother fell seriously ill. On the advice of her physician Dr. Bardhan, she was hospitalized. She was recovering in the famous Woodland Nursing Home of Kolkata. She was still too weak to move about. Yet she was insistent that she would attend a 'Mass' on 10th September, the Inspiration Day.

September 10 was observed by the Order with great fanfare as the Inspiration Day. Its significance lay in the fact that the

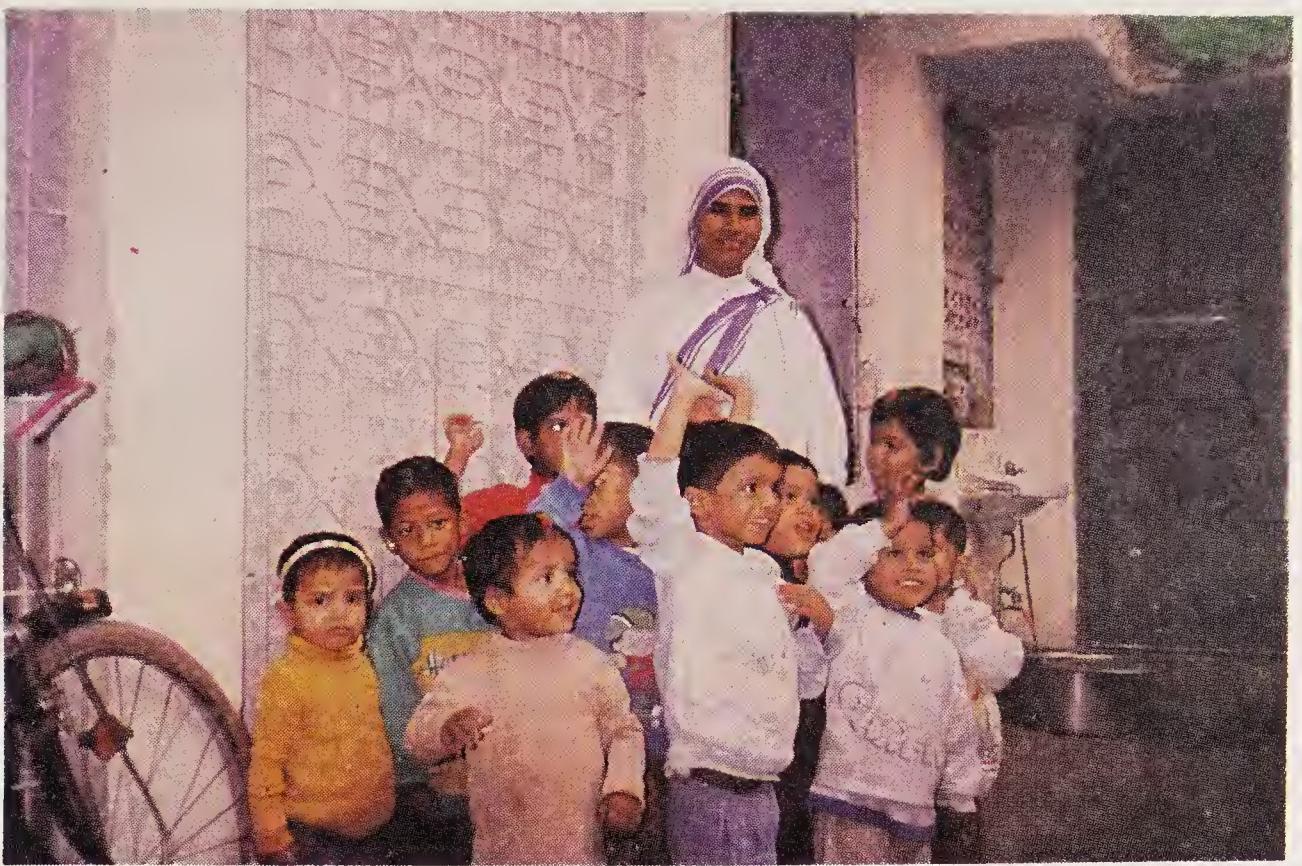
Missionaries of Charity was established on this day. Large prayer meetings would be held on the day.

Mother told Dr. Bardhan, "I must attend the prayer meeting." Dr. Bardhan was diplomatic in his reply. He smiled and said, "Yes, Mother, if you recover by that time. Isn't it Mother?" Mother remained enigmatically silent.

On the morning of September 8, 1996 Mother sent for Dr. Bardhan. In the private room of the Woodland Nursing Home, Mother assertively told the doctor, "Doctor, no matter what, I am going to attend the Mass tomorrow. Please make arrangements accordingly."

Dr. Bardhan did not want to risk her fragile health and kept quiet. Mother again resolutely said, "Doctor, I am definitely going. I know that I shall not live to see another Inspiration Day, next year. That is why I want to attend the celebrations this year."

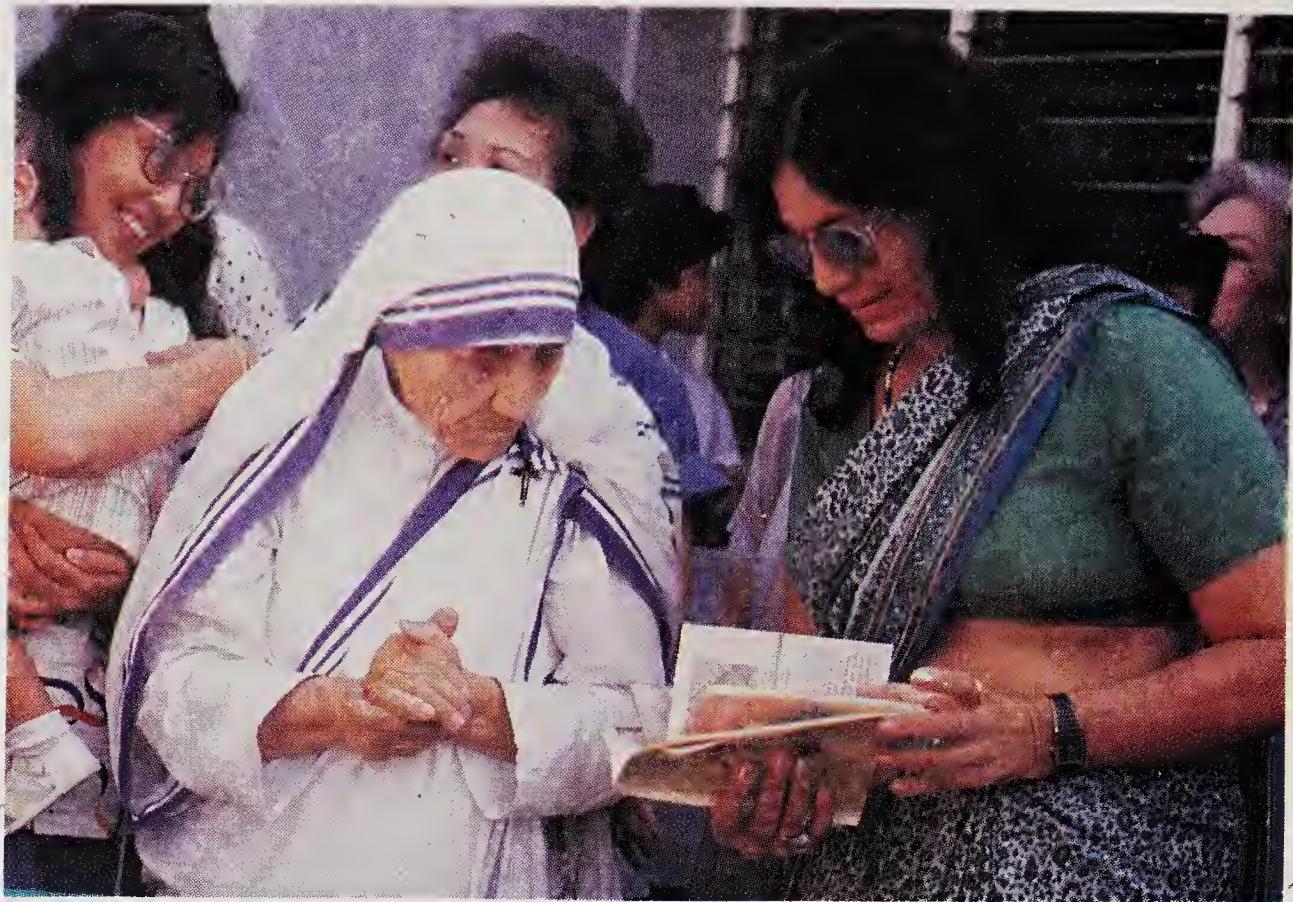
Defying the doctor's advice, Mother did go to the prayer meeting on 10 September 1996. It became her last participation in this celebration. Mother's assertion was prophetic. She indeed left for her heavenly abode on 5th September 1997, barely five days before next year's Inspiration Day on 10 September 1997. Dr. Bardhan said, "Her words, her gestures and her determined voice still echo in my ears and mind!"



Moments of happiness in Shahdara Home

Mother with author couple in Manila

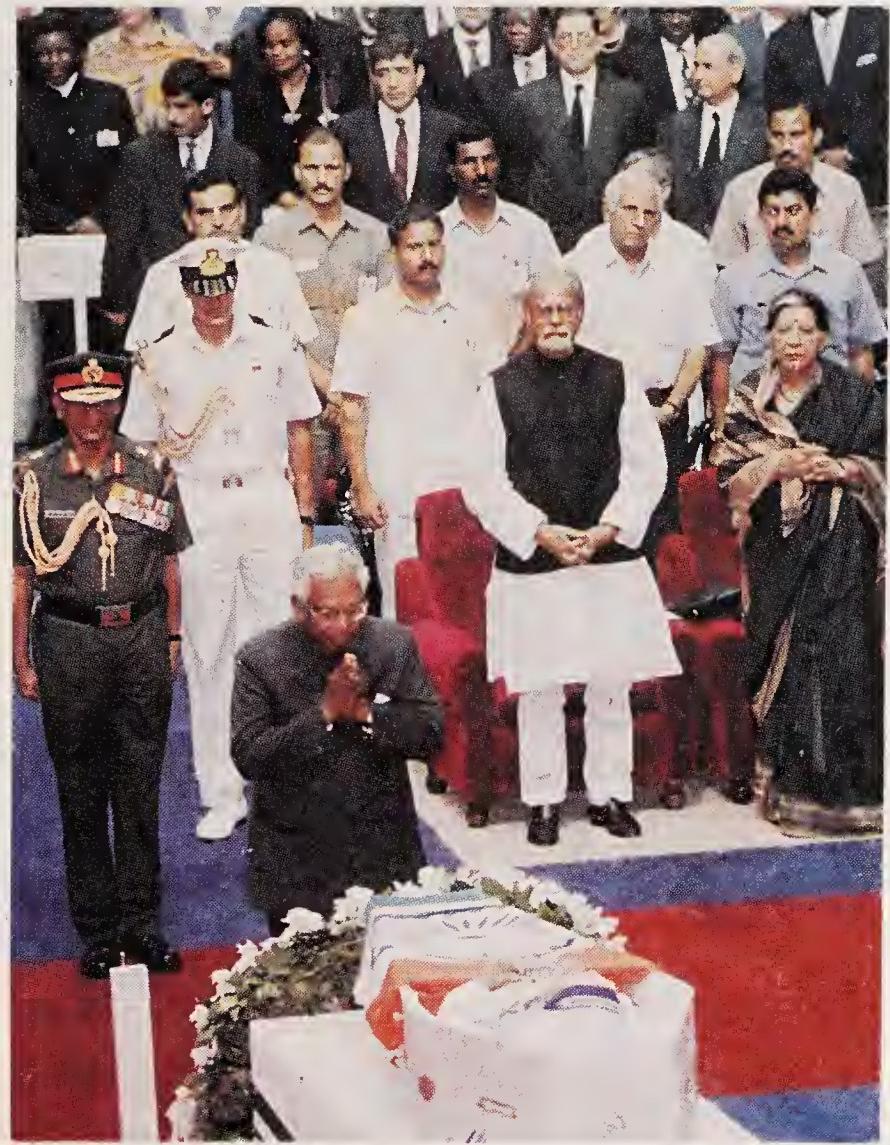




Author Vimla Mehta getting her book autographed  
in Manila from Mother

Mother blessing Sister Nirmala, her successor





President Narayanan and Prime Minister Gujral  
paying their tributes in Kolkata

Photograph of samadhi or tomb of Mother Teréza at the Missionaries of Charity in Kolkata on Dec. 8, 2003





Mother's beatification ceremony at the Vatican



(Photo Courtesy : Rev Dr. Donald H.R. De Souza, Deputy Secy. Gen. CBCI)

## FAREWELL MOTHER !

**5** September 1997 was a black day. Mother Teresa's life was ebbing away. Even while the whole of Kolkata was receiving its bright electric supply, 'Mother House' suddenly plunged into darkness. It was actually an internal electric fault but it seemed as if the electric lights too were overwhelmed by the darkness of Mother's impending death! The temporary blackout almost seemed like a metaphor for the impending calamity!

As usual Mother took a light dinner. In the evening, around seven 'o' clock, she took a light diet of bread, soup and banana. There was no outward indication of anything unusual. But her frail body was in intense pain. Despite the pain, she had completed her usual daily routine without complaining. Then, instead of her usual routine of going to Chapel she retired to her own small room and prayed with Sisters. The pain was now visible on her face.

Mother's aging body, her weakening heart and the implant of a pacemaker and recurring fractures as a result of repeated falls had gradually taken their toll. Her body was enfeebled. Sister Shanti could sense the looming catastrophe.

Shortly after prayer, Mother complained of pain. Sister Shanti rushed to fetch the medicines. Right at that moment light also went out. Sister Shanti groped in absolute darkness with the help of a candlelight. By the time she came back, the lights had come back. Mother complained, "I cannot breathe... I am unable to breathe." Lights again went out.

Mother's personal physician Dr. Alfred Woodward was immediately summoned. Upon arrival, he saw her critical condition and immediately put her on life-support systems. But by this time Mother had perhaps lost her will to live. Ninety minutes later, at 9.30 p.m. the light finally went out from her life. But the torch of

service lit by her will for ever continue to serve as an unflickering beacon light.

News of Mother's death spread like wild fire. People started gathering at 'Mother House'. Sisters from other Homes at Kolkata also rushed to have a last glimpse of their Mother. Their faces reflected their anxieties for the future.

Sister Nirmala, who had succeeded Mother as the Superior General and Head of the Order and nearly three hundred Sisters of Kolkata decided that Mother would be buried inside the Mother House. It was her first love. Even in life, Mother very much liked to every time return to Mother House after any trip abroad.

The President of India ordered that Mother Teresa should be buried with full state honours. Chief Minister Jyoti Basu had also agreed to her burial in the Mother House. "It was for the first time in history that someone was buried with full state honours, inside a private building", said the Municipal Commissioner of Kolkata Asim Burman.

She was only the second non-official person to get state honours. After India became independent, Mahatma Gandhi was the first person not holding any official position to get full state honours after death. Both Mahatma Gandhi and Mother Teresa had no official position with the government. Like Mahatma Gandhi, Mother Teresa also felt the pain of others. Both could truly empathize with the agony of suffering people and dedicated themselves totally to relieving their pain. It was only fitting that the Government of India decided to give them both the rare privilege of last rights with full state honours.

The Government machinery quickly swung into action. A 22.5 Sq. ft. spot was chosen for Mother in the 100 feet long and 27 feet wide hall of Mother House. The sewer and water lines below the floor were diverted and a spot 7.5 feet in length, 3 feet in width and 3 feet in depth was prepared for her final resting place.

Sister Nirmala had quietly but firmly decided, "We want absolute privacy for the last rites of Mother." She closed Mother House for several hours. The body was moved to a small room

inside Mother House and the last rites were performed within closed doors. On 7th September Mother's body was brought from Mother House to the Chapel in the premises of the Loreto Convent and kept there. Mother had first come to this very Loreto Convent when she was an 18-year-old as Agnes Bojaxhiu!. After hard and dedicated service for seventy long years, at the age of eighty seven years, she had gone into eternal sleep.

The embalmed body of Mother was kept in a glass case in the prayer hall of the 155-year-old St. Thomas' Church. Large crowds of people had come to pay their last respects. People with tears in their eyes were standing in long unending serpentine queues. Army jawans were struggling to control the crowds.

On Saturday 13th September 1997, a prayer meeting was arranged in the Netaji Indoor Stadium of Kolkata to pay homage to Mother Teresa. Mother's body was kept on a gun-carriage of the Indian Army. The same gun carriage had earlier carried the bodies of the country's two most illustrious sons—Mahatma Gandhi and Pandit Jawahar Lal Nehru on their last journeys.

At nine in the morning, the last journey commenced from the St. Thomas' Church, with full military honours. The army bands played somber mourning tunes. The cortege moved slowly through Park Street, Jawahar Lal Nehru Road, Cathedral Road, Khidirpur and Red Road and reached Netaji Indoor stadium. Mourning crowds of all faiths and classes had thronged the entire route. Others had occupied vantage positions in the buildings enroute. They were all eager to catch a last glimpse and pay their homage to an extraordinary woman who arrived from a foreign country to adopt India as her home and had devoted her entire life to the service of the poor, the sick and the dying. It started raining as if the heavens too had started crying! Mother's body was brought inside the stadium and placed on the podium by the Army pall bearers to the strains of Rabindranath Tagore's song, "Aguner Parashmani Choao Mane" (Let my heart be touched by the flame of the fire).

Cardinal Angelo Sodano accompanied by nine other Cardinals representing the Pope from Vatican led the Mass. He read out the message of the Pope. Messages from leaders of other religions and faiths were also read out at the end of the service. Different

Heads of States, other dignitaries and representatives from many countries paid their last respects to Mother by laying floral wreaths. The homage continued for many hours.

The dignitaries who had flown in to pay their last respects to Mother were led by President K.R. Narayanan and Prime Minister Inder Kumar Gujral of India, Hillary Clinton, the wife of President Bill Clinton of USA and President Oscar Louis of Italy. Sheikh Hasina, the Prime Minister of Bangladesh, John Pescot, the Deputy Prime Minister of Britain, Ellen, the wife of Prime Minister of Canada and Corazon Aquino, the former President of the Philippines were also present to pay their homage. Dignitaries from 55 different countries paid moving homage to Mother. They had ensured a fitting and grand send-off to Mother. President Narayanan described her as an 'angel of mercy' who spread love and compassion throughout the world and brought succour and relief to the poorest of the poor. In an emotion filled speech, Prime Minister Gujral addressed Mother Teresa as Mahatma. India's world-renowned painter M.F.Husain who has done a series of paintings of Mother for almost two decades, including the one adorning the cover page of this book, said Mother combined 'beauty and power'.

After the tributes, eight majors and captains of the Indian Army brought Mother's coffin outside. Her body was kept on the gun-carriage decorated with flowers. Major General Jitendra Singh of the Indian army led the funeral procession. The Naval Band was playing mourning hymns and tunes. The last 5 km journey from the Indoor Stadium back to Mother House had begun.

To witness the funeral procession, people had reserved for themselves places on the crammed balconies of the homes on the route of last journey. Many people had also perched themselves on trees and many others had found vantage positions in the windows of high-rise buildings. In a scramble to book space and secure for themselves a place to have a last glimpse of the mortal remains of Mother, people were reported to have paid twenty to thirty rupees each. Rich and poor, lepers and healthy, sick and handicapped persons were all there in the procession. They included Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, Jains and Christians. There were young and old children, men and women. Once again, since the death of

Mahatma Gandhi, the entire country and the world were weeping together. All were grief-stricken at heart.

A cross of white flowers lay by the side of Mother's mortal remains draped in the Indian National flag. Five hundred jawans of the Rajput Battalion and eighteen senior officers of the army were marching with the white coffin of Mother. The last journey took three full hours.

Now Mother's final journey had reached its last phase. The funeral procession started from Mother House and it had now ended also at the same place. Before handing over the coffin encapsulating the mortal remains of Mother to the Missionaries of Charity, jawans of the army fired in the air to salute her.

And the dear Mother of all was then laid to eternal rest in Mother House!

## **MISSIONARIES OF CHARITY - A MINI UNITED NATIONS**

**M**issionaries of Charity is soon to celebrate its Golden Jubilee. This empire of humanitarian service has grown by leaps and bounds on the strength of Mother's unflinching faith in God, her firm determination and relentless hard work. From its humble beginnings in a rented room at 14 Creek Lane in Kolkata, this institution now covers more than 600 Homes. It has truly globalized and is now one of the world's largest establishment of compassion, resembling a mini United Nations of 121 countries. Service and care of the poor and destitute and sick and dying rests in the hands of 4000 dedicated Sisters of different nationalities from 79 countries. Transcending all barriers of colour, creed and nationality, these Sisters form the core of the institution. Their only religion is service.

This Order was established on 7th October 1950 after obtaining approval from the Vatican. It was first conceived by Mother in a third floor room of Michael Gomez' house at 14, Creek Lane. In the initial period this Order had no place of its own.

For the first time in 1955, the institution purchased its own building at Lower Circular Road in Kolkata. This building became popular by the name of 'Nirmal Hridaya', a name<sup>17</sup> extremely dear to Mother. As a first acquisition of the institution, Mother had great emotional attachment to the place. This building has since been the Headquarters and the main office of the institution. The regulations of the church prohibit opening of Homes outside the diocese by an institution less than 10 years old. It was therefore only in 1960, full ten years after the establishment of Mother's Congregation, that she got permission to open a Home outside the limits of the Diocese of Kolkata.

The first new Home outside Kolkata was established at Ranchi.

The same year, Prime Minister Jawahar Lal Nehru inaugurated a Home in Delhi. Thereafter, many others came up in quick succession and the process has continued unabated ever since.

The first Home abroad was established in the Cocorote city of Venezuela in Latin America. A second Home abroad was opened in Rome, the heart of the Roman Catholic faith, to serve the citizens of Rome. Mother set up her next two Homes in Australia where service and help were provided to persons addicted to liquor and narcotics. Today, Mother's Homes have been established even in the affluent countries such as the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, Greece, Portugal, Japan, Russia and Hong Kong.

The expansion of Mother's activities was not only geographical - the ambit of service activities has also grown. At 'Nirmal Hriday', care and comfort is provided to the sick and dying as well as old, infirm and abandoned persons. In many centres people suffering from drug and alcohol addiction and AIDS are similarly cared for. There are night shelters too at several places, to provide a resting place for the homeless for the night. There are separate Homes for divorced, deserted and unwanted women and unwed mothers. Education and care is also provided to orphans at children's Homes and schools.

Mother had developed a special capability and expertise in providing swift relief to the victims of natural disasters like floods or earthquakes in different countries. Mother and her Missionaries of Charity had become harbingers of love and light in every area of crisis. In disasters, Mother Teresa moved in swiftly and galvanized the machinery. Her Sisters clad in their trademark white saree with blue border, and often Mother herself, would almost instantaneously reach such affected areas for rapid relief, with stocks of medicines and above all an abundant stock of love, affection, hope and service!

How are the affairs of this vast institution conducted? How was this empire of service all over the world governed? How does this institution work like a well-oiled machine? The Missionaries of Charity has a Constitution, an administrative structure, and rules and regulations, which are strictly enforced and followed. According to the specific needs of each Home, Sisters are assigned for duty

there. Each Home is placed under the charge of a Sister Superior, who controls the work of all Sisters in that Home. At the next level, a Regional Superior looks after the affairs of several Homes. The work of Regional Supervisors is in turn overseen by four Councillor Generals.

At the apex is the Superior General, who as the head of the organization is the final authority responsible for the operations of the entire Order. Every six years, an absolute majority in a secret ballot elects the Superior General by a collegium called the General Chapter. The Chapter comprises about 100 members including the 4 Councillor Generals, all the Regional Superiors and few other representatives from the regions. The General Chapter has met every six years since 1967. Mother had been elected to the position of Superior General without a break in all the elections since 1967 and held the position until about a few months before her death in 1997. In 1989, she sought to retire because of her ill health. In fact, in 1990, she even obtained special permission from the Vatican to step down and to convene a General Chapter for the selection of a successor, a full year ahead of the scheduled time. But Mother's request to retire was turned down by the General Chapter and it voted unanimously to retain her at the helm.

Notwithstanding the traditional organizational set up, Mother was the heart and soul of the Order right from its inception until the time of her death. She always remained the fountain-head of inspiration for the ideals and activities of the Order for all the forty-seven years and would undoubtedly continue to remain so even after her death.

Mother did not have much inclination for maintaining accounts etc. She had a simple and straight outlook - what you get with love, distribute it with love. She often remarked, "I have no money to keep in a bank. This money belongs to the poor people and must reach them without delay."

The regulations and daily routine were strictly enforced and followed. She had worked incessantly for years, every day from five in the morning to until late past midnight. It was a wonder of wonders how a frail diminutive person like her could take such a punishing schedule, day in and day out for almost half a century.

It was only her strong will power that toughened her to carry such a heavy burden. Even failing health in later years failed to deter her.

Mother herself would take all the important decisions for each Home. She knew each Home like the palm of her hand and even in far away countries it was her writ that ran. Before establishing a new Home in any country, she would invariably assess the situation herself. She was the ultimate decision maker. After assessing the needs of a specific place she would approach the local diocese and officers for help. She never faced disappointment in getting necessary clearances.

Whenever a new Home was to be opened abroad, selection of Sisters for it was done very carefully. Sisters assigned for the first time were required to strictly follow the Order's rules and regulations for their daily schedule of activities. On the other hand, Mother also deeply cared for her Sisters and always had their welfare uppermost in her heart. This is why these Sisters cheerfully endured the tough and trying daily routine and worshipped Mother. She was a great leader and had unparalleled managerial capabilities. Even 50 years ago, Mother had already mastered the modern management techniques, including the delicate nuances of Human Resource Development and Management. No wonder, the organization is ticking like clockwork!

Mother though frail and of small and thin frame was affectionate by nature but had steel in her determination. She remained the soul as well as source of energy of this mini United Nations. The geography teacher at the St Mary's High School in Kolkata had come a long way in the establishment of this vast geographical expanse of the Missionaries of Charity!

It is no surprise that at the screening of the film, 'Mother Teresa' at the 40th session of the United National General Assembly, the then Secretary General, Javier Perez de Cueller introduced Mother as the "most powerful woman in the world".

## **SAINTHOOD FOR MOTHER**

**I**n a departure from old conventions and before the set period of time Vatican has initiated the process to declare Mother as a 'Saint.'

Christian society has a long history of the process of declaration of Saints. Some learned scholars believe that the tradition to declare some one as a saint existed in Polytheism much before the advent of Christianity. But Vatican disagrees. Whatever be the correct position, today the Vatican considers itself the sole authority to declare Saints and it is now a very Roman Catholic convention. So then, what is the process for declaring one a Saint?

In the initial stages of Christian religion, the process for declaration of a Saint was not so complex and long. After the death of any philanthropist, spiritual or a popular Christian, the society accepted him as a Saint. The local church used to endorse this decision by declaring such a person as a Saint. Permission from the Pope was not required. But now for the last one thousand years the final authority has come to be vested in the Pope.

In 1983, Pope John Paul II made this process relatively simpler. Even then it is quite forbidding, complex and long. Going through different stages in this process, the person is subjected to tests akin to gold being tested through fire. After the death of any eminent personality who is considered a candidate for Sainthood, ordinarily any process can be started only after a lapse of 5 years. This interval of five years is called the 'waiting period'. During this period only the activities of that personality are properly documented.

This is followed by a presentation before the Vatican by the Bishop of the local diocese, where the candidate lived and worked, of comprehensive details and the reasons for declaring anyone as a Saint. Simultaneously, a 'Promoter of Faith' is appointed. The

Promoter of Faith prepares an account of faith of the candidate in Catholic principles and a list of his or her work for human welfare.

Thereafter, a Bishop from the Vatican presents the case in support of the candidate while the Promoter of Faith argues against the candidature. There are spirited arguments from both sides. A committee of cardinals and officers of the church appointed by the Pope considers these for and against arguments. The conclusions of the Committee are presented before the Pope. If the Pope is satisfied, he allows the process to proceed further by declaring, in the interim, the candidate to be 'venerable'. Such a person is held in high esteem by the entire Christian society and can be prayed to.

The next part of the process is called 'Beatification.' This is the stage when one or two healing miracles achieved by the candidate have to be discovered. For the purpose, any miraculous reliefs from any very serious ailments or acute injuries as a result of the prospective Saint's blessings are deemed to be miracles.

Determination of one or more miracles is essential before the final and the important stage of canonisation. However, if the candidate has laid down his or her life for the sake of religion, the miracle requirements could be waived.

After the declaration of a person as a Saint, he/she gets a definite place in the worldwide calendar of the Roman Catholic Church. Churches all over the world honour this.

In the past, it was sometimes centuries after death before someone was declared a Saint. Bishop John Neumann Philadelphia, who was Bishop in 1850s could be declared a Saint only after more than 100 years of his death. Georgeo Prasati had served the poor with great dedication. He died in 1925 of tuberculosis at the young age of twenty-four. He was declared a Saint a long sixty-five years later, in 1990. Pope John Paul II is to canonize now on 5 October 2003 the German priest Father Arnold Janssen who died almost a century ago and the Austrian priest Josef Freinademetz who took the Order to China in the late 19th century.

Catherine Drexel became a nun after renouncing a rich legacy. Even her 'Beatification' took more than thirty years. When Pope John Paul II ascended the papacy, requests for Sainthood for more

than thirty thousand persons were pending with the Vatican. Pope John Paul II has tried hard to accelerate the process. In his first 20 years as the Pope, he has Canonized 278 new Saints and Beatified 760 others in a final step before Sainthood. Shortly after the death of Mother Teresa, demands were made from many corners in the world and churches to immediately declare her as a Saint. Italian cardinal Pio Laghi even went to the extent of declaring, "Mother had done what Jesus did 2000 years ago."

Pope John Paul II himself has been one of the greatest admirers of Mother's work. Many years earlier, he had taken a rare decision to gift her precious land in the Vatican, along with his permission to open a Home there. It is the general expectation that with his great respect for Mother, the Pope will like to expeditiously take the process forward in case of Mother.

Because of her work among the poorest of the poor, during her lifetime itself the world was already calling Mother as a Saint - the 'Saint of Gutters'. At the time of her death, thousands of people of Calcutta spontaneously voiced, "What is need for any affirmation from the Vatican? Millions of people all over the world had already accepted her as a Saint, for devoting her entire life to selfless service of the poorest of the poor."

Perhaps for this very reason, the Pope had already waived some procedural requirements. A proposal of Archbishop of Calcutta, Harry D'Souza to shorten the waiting period had been accepted. The process of declaring Mother Teresa a Saint had been set in motion within two years of her death, instead of the traditional waiting period of five years. Further, a 'Promoter of Faith' had also been appointed. Vatican had also constituted the special committee of cardinals. As the miraculous curing of a woman from North Bengal has been attributed to Mother, it has now been decided that Mother will be Beatified in Rome on 19th October, 2003 by Pope John Paul II. Her Beatification, merely six years after her death is believed to be the shortest Beatification time after death in the Roman Catholic history.

Now the question is when the next step will come? When will Mother Teresa be formally declared a 'Saint?' Even if the world has already anointed her as a Saint and a papal seal of approval may seem like a mere formality, she seems to be certainly destined for a fast-track Sainthood.

## **SIGNIFICANT MOMENTS IN MOTHER'S LIFE**

- 1910 27 Aug - Born in Skopje City of Yugoslavia (which was then a part of the Kingdom of Albania, which was itself a part of the Ottoman empire). After the break-up of Yugoslavia, Skopje has become a part of Macedonia. Childhood name Agnes Gonxha Bojaxhiu.
- 1917 - Death of her Father who was a builder
- 1922 - Spirit for service of the poor and destitute is kindled.
- 1929 - Arrival in India
- 1931 - Started teaching at Loreto order. Changed the name Agnes and adopted the name Teresa in memory of a Teresa
- 1931 - Joined as a teacher at St. Mary's High School, Kolkata.
- 1946 - While on way to Darjeeling got inspiration from Jesus Christ to 'serve the poorest of the poor.'
- 1948 - Acquired Indian citizenship
- 1948, 18 Aug - Resigned from Loreto to move towards her sublime aim. Adopted her trade-mark white saree, with blue border as her Order's dress.
- 1948, 21 Dec - Established first primary school in the locality of Moti Jheel in Kolkata

- 1949, 2 Feb - Moved to 14, Creek Lane in Kolkata, the house of Michael Gomez
- 1949, 19 March - First Sister Subhashini Dass to get herself enrolled in Mother's register took the name of sister Agnes.
- 1950, 7 Oct. - Foundation of the 'Missionaries of Charity' approved by Pope Pious XII
- 1952- 22 August - Established 'Nirmal Hriday' for the care and comfort of the poor, the sick and the dying
- 1953 - Established first Orphanage.
- 1957 - Mother took a vow to serve lepers
- 1959 - Established first Mission house outside Kolkata at Ranchi
- 1962, April - Decorated with the 'Padma Shri' by the Government of India
- 1962, 31 August - Got the Ramon Magsaysay Award, Manila, Philippines for spreading International Understanding
- 1963, 25 March - Established the 'Missionaries of Brothers' in Delhi. The Archbishop of Kolkata gave his benediction.
- 1963, March - Established of a new centre of the Missionaries of Charity at New Delhi
- 1964, December - The Pop's car imported for his use in the Eucharistic Congress at Bombay gifted to Mother.
- 1965 - Established first Home outside India at Cocorote in Venezuela, to help landless people of African descent in that country
- 1967 - New Home set up in Colombo
- 1968 - New Centres set up in Tabora in Tanzania and in the interior localities in Rome Centre set up in Brook city, Australia

- 1969, 26 March - 'The International Association of co-workers of Mother Teresa' recognized by the 'Missionaries of Charity'
- 1970 - Went on a visit to Jordan
- 1970 - New Home was set up in Melbourne, Australia
- 1970, 8 Dec. - New centres set up in London for training of new nuns from Europe and America
- 1971 - Pope John XXIII Peace Prize given by Pope Paul VI, at Vatican city.
- 1971 - Given the Joseph Kennedy Jr. Foundation Award at Washington D.C.
- 1971 - Conferred the honorary degree of Doctor of Humane Letters by the University of San Diego.
- 1972 - Given the Jawahar Lal Nehru Peace Award at New Delhi
- 1973 - Honoured with the Templeton Foundation Prize for Progress in Religion at London. 'Prem Dan' was set up.
- 1975 - Special guest at conference held as part of the International year of Women at Mexico.
- 1975 - Grand Celebration of the Silver Jubilee of the Missionaries of Charity
- Mother Teresa's sketch on the 'sires' Medal of an International institution i.e., the FAO of the United Nations
- Given the Honorary Degree of 'Deshikottam' by Vishwa Bharati University
- Awarded the Albert Schweitzer International prize
- 1976 - Established 'Nirmal Shishu Bhawan' and Nirmal Hriday in Kolkata
- 1978 - Awarded the Order of the British Empire

- 1979, 10 Dec. - Awarded the Nobel Peace Prize
- 1980, 22 March - Decorated with the 'Bharat Ratna', the highest civilian award in India
- 1982 - In a achievement of Mother persuaded both Israel and Palestine to cease fire to save 37 children trapped in a hospital in Beirut, during the war between Israel and Palestine.
- 1983 - Heart attack while going to Rome to meet Pope John Paul II
- 1983 - Decorated with the Order Of Merit by Queen Elizabeth II of England
- 1985 - Decorated with the highest award of America The the 'Medal of Freedom'
- 1988 - Casa Dono di Maria, Mother's Home in the Vatican, opened.
- 1989 - Another heart attack - Pacemaker fixed. Mother announced her decision to resign as Chief of the Missionaries of Charity.
- 1990 - Compelled to withdraw her decision to resign as she was re-elected as Chief of the order in a secret ballot.
- 1991 - Admitted to La Jolla Hospital in California. Suffered from pneumonia in Tijuana city, Mexico.
- 1993 - Again admitted to hospital. Three ribs broken due to a fall in Rome. Left artery rendered dysfunctional.
- 1993 - Granted honorary US citizenship
- 1997, 13 March - Resigned from the post of Chief of the Missionaries of Charity
- 1997, 5 Sep. - Died at 9.30 p.m. after heart stroke
- 1997, 7-13 Sep - Prayer Meetings and homage by public
- Sept. 1997-13 - Last rites with full state honours.





The life of Mother Teresa is a pious tale of unalloyed compassion and love. She brought a soothing touch of concern and comfort to the rejected and the abandoned and applied the balm of care and healing to the sick and dying. This book includes many such touching incidents from the life and work of Mother Teresa. The author couple was intimately associated with Mother and her activities and this provides added poignancy to these vignettes.

Veerendra Raj Mehta is an engineer and was a senior civil servant who worked for the Government of India in New Delhi and the Asian Development Bank in Manila.

Vimla Mehta is 'Sahitya Bhushan' in Hindi literature and has effortlessly combined her dual roles as a home-maker and a prolific writer in Hindi. Since 1970, she has authored 13 books and numerous articles.



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